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From Authoritarianism to Upheaval: the Political Economy of the Syrian Uprising and Regime Persistence

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Abstract

The ensuing bloodshed and deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Syria, the failure of the United Nations Security Council to reach a consensus on what action to take, and the involvement of contending external actors partially reflect the complexity of the current impasse. Despite the importance of regional and international factors, however, this papers attempts to argue that the *domestic* dynamics of the Syrian crisis have been vitally important in determining the course of the popular uprising and the regime's response. In this, Syria's crisis belongs with the Arab Spring the trajectories and prospects of which have been shaped by dynamics within regimes. It will be seen that the formal and informal institutional structure of the Ba'thist regime in Syria has been critical to its resilience and ability to stay united so far while attempting to crush a peaceful popular uprising that turned into insurgency in the face of the regime's violent crackdown.

Keywords: political economy, regime cohesion, Syria

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From Authoritarianism to Upheaval: the Political Economy of the Syrian Uprising and Regime Persistence

Housam DARWISHEH

The 'Syrian Spring' began gradually in March 2011 but escalated into a violent conflict that drew in regional and international actors and variously competing opposition and regime forces. The ensuing bloodshed and deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Syria, the failure of the United Nations Security Council to reach a consensus on what action to take, as it did on Libya, and the involvement of contending external actors partially reflect the complexity of the current impasse.

Despite the importance of regional and international factors, however, the *domestic* dynamics of the Syrian crisis have been vitally important in determining the course of the popular uprising and the regime's response. In this, Syria's crisis belongs with the Arab Spring the trajectories and prospects of which have been shaped by dynamics within regimes. By that I mean, the specificities of each Arab state considered in terms of state-building processes, and socioeconomic, political, and institutional structures. The formal and informal institutional structure of the Ba'thist regime in Syria has been critical to its resilience and ability to stay united so far while attempting to crush a peaceful popular uprising that turned into insurgency in the face of the regime's violent crackdown.

The Syrian regime's excessive repression of the opposition indicates that behind its security strategy and military operations the still united ruling coalition lacks political arrangements that can satisfactorily contain domestic challenges without endangering its own existence. Whereas Egypt's regime was flexible and adaptable and its institutional structure allowed it much room to maneuver in an abruptly changed environment, the Syrian ruling coalition has been unable to deal with the uncertain consequences of making concessions to its opponents. Here, the Syrian regime's responses to its deepening crisis will be examined in relation to the nature of civil-military relations, internal mechanisms of rule, and the core characteristics of regime-constructed power structures that included crucial ruling mechanisms and co-optation strategies. Moreover, in order to understand the Syrian uprising and its level of violence, now the highest in the Arab world, we need to know the basics of Syria's history and the nature of state-society relations under the Asad rule.

Historical Background

Until its independence from France in 1946, Syria had never constituted a unified state or separate political entity. Syria had always been part of various empires or controlled by external rulers such as the Persians, Greeks and Romans. From 1516 to the end of World War I, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. The French and the British had promised to make Syria an independent kingdom after the Arab army defeated the Ottoman and captured Damascus. By the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, however, the French and the British divided between them the provinces of the Ottoman Empire situated outside the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, in 1920, the League of Nations handed Syria and Lebanon as mandated territories over to France.

Between 1920 and 1946, the French prevented the development of the Syrian national community by dividing the country into several administrative and political units along regional and sectarian lines. The French also fostered sectarian, class and communal separatism, widening the gap between the majority Sunnis and various minorities by recruiting members of the Alawite and Druze minorities for its "Special Troupes of the Levant."[1] At independence, therefore, Syria lacked an exclusive central authority that could serve as a focus of identity and loyalty for the whole population; instead Syria was a geographical expression with no unified political identity or community.

Syria's troubled political and economic pre- and post-independence era and the defeat in the 1948 Arab war with Israel intensified conflict between politicians and army officers who capitalized on popular discontent to legitimatize military takeovers.[2] This accounts for a succession of military coups (more than 10 successful ones between 1949 and 1970) and the rising influence of various military factions in politics and power struggles. Post-independent instability and increasing polarization in the political system led the elites to dissolve the Syrian Arab Republic and create in 1958 a political union with Nasser's Egypt, the United Arab Republic (UAR). The union collapsed in 1961, followed by the first Ba'th military coup in 1963. Although it failed, the union was a turning point in modern Syria under which three important developments took place: (1) all political parties were banned; (2) a comprehensive agrarian reform law was introduced; and (3) socialist reforms were initiated through the nationalization of major sectors of the economy.[3] In other words, the union accelerated the process of state expansion by exporting the Egyptian systems of economic and political management and laid the basis for consolidating one-party rule that used the state to advance development and block the formation of independent social, political or civil organizations.

While the regime maintained its coercive power by restructuring the regime-military relations, it appeased popular discontent through promised wealth redistribution, populist platforms and the construction of a cross-class coalition. For example, the regime's mobilization of the rural periphery by promising to raise agricultural productivity and social protection helped to secure its legitimacy and stability. To consolidate its power via a populist agenda, moreover, the Ba'th Party capitalized on the rural-urban and class divides. In the pre-Ba'th era, Syria's rural regions as well as the urban poor and working classes were marginalized and powerless and, hence, unrepresented in the exclusively urban political arena. The marginalization and deprivation of the rural regions, however, was not only caused by the urban hold on wealth and power but also by rural fragmentation along clan, tribal, sect and village lines.[4]

Originally, the Ba'thist regime in Syria built its political power on mass rural mobilization and applying drastic socialist reforms. What was most transformed under the Ba'th Party was the character of the ruling class: a new rural-based elite replaced the urban rich of Damascus and Aleppo who used to form the old regime. For its main support base, the Ba'th Party recruited those who were outside the system of patronage and connections, such as rural professionals, teachers, doctors, students and minorities. The Ba'thist campaigns of secularism, socialism, and Arab nationalism promised equitable income distribution and the reduction of inequalities between the periphery and center and between rich and poor. Yet one outcome was sectarian mobilization among depressed groups who benefited from the reduction of inequalities as well as upward mobility mainly among the minorities.

By redistributing power and resources to the agricultural communities, the Ba'thist regime broke the power of the old elite and destroyed their control over land and the market. This was further advanced by a socialist transformation that replaced capitalist and feudal relations of production in the countryside with redistributive land reforms, public land distribution and other forms of cooperative and collective organizations of rural populations. The promise of egalitarianism through a modernizing agrarian 'revolution' was the pillar on which the Ba'th Party legitimized its rule and institutionalized the state's links with peasants, farmers and the working class. Moreover, the nationalization of industry and commerce decisively transformed power and social structures, bringing the economy fully under state control. Following a non-capitalist road to development, Syria under the Ba'thist regime established a privileged relationship with the Communist bloc. The early stage of Ba'thist rule was very much pro-rural and anti-cosmopolitan/urban which alienated the urban bourgeoisie, upper middle class and the traditional religious establishment.

The planned course of radical social transformation, however, took a different path after Syria's decisive defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967 and Israel's capture and annexation of the Golan Heights. The defeat exacerbated a split within the Ba'th Party: reformists/pragmatists led by Hafiz al-Asad differed with radicals led by Salah Jadid on how to deal with the consequences of war. The reformist wing, which had a strong base in the military, held that radical Ba'thist reforms undermined national unity, increased Syria's regional isolation and provoked military escalation by Israel and the West.[5] Thus, Asad's coup of 1970, dubbed "*the Corrective Movement*," removed the radicals from key positions in the party and state institutions, and maintained the broad lines of the Ba'thist program. By being more moderate and less ideological the Asad camp paved the way for new regional, economic and political shifts that consolidated Asad's rule and prevented the recurrence of military coups, institutional factionalism, and wars with Israel.

Asad's Consolidation of Power

Asad's rise to power represented a turning point in the process of the regime formation and power consolidation of the Ba'th Party. As Brownlee argued, strong parties arise from the decisive victory of one elite faction over all others during the initial formation of an authoritarian regime.[6] The cornerstone of Asad's regime consolidation involved an end to the factionalism and competition for political power that had marked Syrian politics since independence and Ba'th rule between 1963 and the 1970s. Asad's control of the party and his ability to hold the elites together and provide mechanisms for long-term political security preempted future party factionalism. He filled the party and security apparatuses with loyal members of his clan and built patronage networks with other minorities, like the Druze and Christians. He also co-opted key military Sunni families to contain dissent within the military.

As in other post-colonial Arab republics, Asad built organizations through which he could mobilize and channel regime supporters. Unlike other Arab states, however, state and party expanded and merged in Syria to the extent that they were hardly distinguishable. Asad transformed a divided political society and a weak state identity by constructing a cohesive structure of power. At its base, inclusive policies mobilized cross-sectarian and rural-urban constituencies. At the top level, loyalists and Alawi officers gathered around the president

‘combined privileged access to him with positions in the party and control of the levers of coercion. They were, therefore, in an unrivalled position to act as political brokers and, especially in times of crisis, were uniquely placed to shape outcomes.’[7] Sectarianism alone did not secure elite cohesion. Rather, the socioeconomic make-up of the then newly emerging minoritarian regime allowed for cohesion among its members. As Batatu notes ‘whereas the Alawite officers were overwhelmingly of rural origins, peasant extraction, common regional provenance… the Sunni officers were hopelessly divided in political, regional and class terms’.[8]

On the economic front, Asad strengthened his regime by co-opting key business families and allowing the urban merchant class and the private sector some degree of access to the system to moderate the urban-rural conflict caused by the radical Ba‘thist policies of the 1960s. He achieved this by changing the agrarian reform law and advancing limited economic liberalization under state-led growth.[9] In short, the regime establish its control via a constellation of personal relations, formal and informal institutional structures and patronage networks that linked society to the state by inclusionary and exclusionary strategies.

The regime’s legal control of state institutions was enshrined in the 1973 constitution which granted the Ba‘th Party the sole position of leading state and society. According to the constitution, the president must be nominated by the leadership of the Ba‘th Party, endorsed by parliament, and then approved by a majority in a national referendum. Nationwide Ba‘thist mobilization was enhanced by constructing national projects and dams that created electricity and advanced irrigation. Asad’s control was extended by the massive expansion of the state bureaucracy and military intelligence services which, together with economic distribution, was made possible by foreign aid after 1973 and the subsequent dramatic increase of oil prices. As it were, society was turned into an enlarged regime having popular organizations, such as peasant and trade unions that were directly linked to the Ba‘th Party and enforced loyalty and the implementation of government directives.[10]

The resultant social and economic networks were also networks of political surveillance and social control whose innumerable informants kept the populace obedient to the regime. Batatu’s depiction of Asad’s power structure identifies four levels with distinct characteristics:

> First, Asad’s undisputable authority to the general direction of policy and to the questions crucial to his regime, such as security, intelligence, military and foreign affairs; second, unpublicized chiefs of the multiple intelligence and security networks which function independently from one another, enjoy broad latitude and keep a close watch on everything in the country that is of concern to his regime. On same second level, and also answerable to Asad, are the commanders of the politically relevant, regime shielding, coup deterring, elite armed formations, such as the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, the Third Armored Division, and before 1984, the Defense Companies. It is these formations, which alone are allowed in the capital, that constitute the essential underpinning of his power and not the regular armed forces; third, the Ba‘th Party command, whose Secretary General is Asad, serves as a consultative body for Asad and at the same time watches, through the party machine, over the proper implementation of his policies by the elements on the fourth level, namely the ministers, the higher bureaucrats, the provincial governors, the members of the executive boards of the local councils, and the leaders of the party’s ancillary

mass organizations and their subordinate organs.[11]

The regime's broad social 'coalition', though, began to be diminished in the mid-1980s as the state economy failed to generate enough domestic resources for populist policies during several economic crises in the 1980s. As the regime fell short of revenue, it responded in two different ways. It introduced privatization to mobilize private capital and it loosened the state's grip over the market with limited liberalization. The regime's strategy was to progressively extend and shift its patronage networks to the private sector while controlling access to resources and the market in order to restrict and limit privatization to selected members and organizations.[12] Unlike Anwar Sadat who changed the political system when he initiated political pluralism and economic liberalization in Egypt in the 1970s, Asad preferred remodeling the system to preserve his ability to create, co-opt and control the newly rising business community.

The remodeling of the regime's socio-political base was introduced in the 1990 elections when parliament was first open to independent, non-party candidates. From a total of 250 parliamentary seats, Hafez al-Asad allocated 82 to non-party members. Thus, the regime could extend its patronage networks to the business and commercial elites but also reach out to the religious community by giving a number of pro-regime Sunni *'ulama* parliamentary seats and access to official institutions and media and allowing them to form nationwide religious networks of schools and charity organizations.[13] But economic liberalization and selective tolerance of the religious sphere was not accompanied by meaningful political liberalization, such as the creation of a political party that could openly take responsibility for the regime's reform process. Indeed, not economic imperatives alone but political motives of continued survival under changing conditions drove the regime's turn to economic liberalization. Thus, whereas populist measures 'justified' authoritarianism at the moment of Asad's ascent to power, authoritarianism likewise 'justified' economic liberalization for the small privileged elite circles that formed around the president.

In the short term, Hafez al-Asad's economic liberalization was manageable thanks to aid from the Arab Gulf, other forms of foreign assistance and oil revenues, which supported the regime's budget and autonomy from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Yet economic liberalization significantly aggravated Syria's economic problems as the government later exhausted its revenue. The end of the Cold War compelled the former Soviet Union's Middle East clients, including Syria, to turn to other sources of aid. Hence, in 1990, the regime allied itself with the UN-sponsored force to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. This brought large-scale Western aid which likewise followed Syria's efforts to play a role in the Arab-Israeli peace process and influence Lebanon's domestic politics.

When it was formed, the state under Asad was defined by its capacity to penetrate society and regulate social relations through the Ba'th Party's domination of state institutions. However, the state's declining ability to extract enough revenues to sustain populist policies diminished the regime's social coalition. Although economic liberalization did not weaken the regime's control, it undermined its capacity for social mobilization as the Ba'th Party's role shifted towards developing patronage networks with the business community. No matter how irrelevant to social mobilization the Ba'th Party became, its organizational reach was instrumental in providing information for political surveillance and the control of opposition elements and civil society at large. Yet, as the party's role was steadily changed from social mobilization to political surveillance it exacerbated resentment in its former rural base and led an increasingly alienated youth to regard the regime as a

mere repressive machine that could only be challenged by mass protest, as had happened in neighboring countries.

The Rural Base of the Syrian Protest Movement: Bringing Back the Old Regime

If the regime still kept control of state institutions and society, it did not compensate for the reduction of its social base by permitting a changing socioeconomic order to express itself; nor did it allow the emergence of civil society organizations to address deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. Having apparently lost its capacity for social mobilization and networking, the regime chose to bolster its alliance with the new bourgeoisie, particularly with influential commercial and business segments and families close to the regime.

Many observers were surprised when the protest movement began in Dar'a, a former Ba'thist stronghold that had benefited from the Ba'th land reforms, employment and high posts in government. However, the Ba'thist social contract unraveled with the declining ability of the public sector to provide employment. This setback coincided with the rapid decline in oil reserves, and the loss of job opportunities in Lebanon after Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in 2006 following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafki Hariri.[14] It was also a blow to the regime's long-term survival because of Lebanon's importance to Syria's economy and the financial benefits from the Lebanese black market many Syrian officials had enjoyed for decades. In other words, a formerly loyal constituency was turning recalcitrant.

Climate change also unexpectedly eroded the legitimacy of the regime. Waves of drought caused severe rural poverty and sparked massive rural-urban migration, generating unprecedented polarization between urban and rural areas and between the haves and have-nots, a situation that did not exist in Syria before. A demographic transition shaped by rapid urbanization and internal migration, exacerbated by streams of refugees from Iraq, put further pressure on the state's ability to provide services such as housing, clean water and health. Whereas large cities such as Damascus and Aleppo with relatively developed infrastructure could absorb waves of migrants, underdeveloped cities, such as Dar'a, Hama and Homs, suffered deterioration of already poor conditions.

The severe drought since 2006 exacerbated water scarcity in the northeast region where about 95 percent of the population affected by water scarcity lives. In 2010, the World Food Program (WFP) started to distribute emergency food packages to more than 200,000 people in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hasaka, three vast semi-arid provinces in eastern Syria that were once the nation's breadbasket. Much of the affected population urgently needed help, but foreign funds were lacking because political tension between Syria and the United States led to cutbacks in aid programs.[15] The WFP measures could neither mitigate the losses of livestock nor preserve the food security of herders and their families living in the Syrian Steppe.[16]

Syria had suffered from waves of drought since 1990, but thanks to government subsides, farmers were able to withstand short-term droughts. But the drought of 2006–2010, the longest and worst in Syria's modern history, coincided with the erosion of state subsidies to make agricultural communities highly vulnerable.[17] The drought and the government's lack of interest in addressing

its consequences drove the majority of people from these areas towards the interior governorates, mainly Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Dar'a. As it was, internal migration produced many humanitarian, social and health problems. For example, school enrolment has fallen while dropout rates have risen since 2008. According to a UN needs assessment, enrolment in some schools in eastern Syria has fallen by 70 to 80 percent.

The rural areas also suffered from the negative impact of the Ba'thist regime's populist policies which stressed the cultivation of certain crops that required an enormous amount of water. Those policies were related to the regime strategy of enhancing national security by attaining self-sufficiency in wheat and cotton, the most 'strategic' but high water-consuming crops. Yet, very little was done to manage irrigation sustainably. Excessive irrigation raised the salinity of the soil and aggravated the effects of the drought.[18] Policy mismanagement and lack of urgent government planning contributed to the inability of the agricultural system to cope with the drought and its aftermath. Economic liberalization reduced subsidies for basic commodities such as diesel fuel which increased the cost of pumping irrigation water and transporting products to market. The overall impact of the regime's failure to confront water-related challenges pushed famers and their communities deeper into poverty. The demographic transition meant that the social structure was changing significantly while the old social contract that promised food security and socioeconomic stability was no longer valid. With all that, the regime's base of support and 'legitimacy' were crumbling.

Externally, Bashar al-Asad's continued support for Hezbollah and Hamas, his strong stance against American aggression in Iraq in 2003 and Syria's acceptance of more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees gained him more power within Syria and the region. On the whole, the regime was struggling to avoid regional isolation caused by the regime change in Iraq and the loss of Syrian control over Lebanon. The regime sought to use the presence of Iraqi refugees to deter the USA from destabilizing its rule, and force it to engage on other domestic and regional issues. In addition the regime hoped to deepen its influence in Iraq or even demonstrate to the Syrian people the heavy cost of the 'Iraqi model'.[19] But the open border policy towards Iraqi refugees, however, had negative domestic impacts – homelessness, inflation, food and rent prices, unemployment, and economic inequalities all increased. These socioeconomic problems caused considerable instability, creating a domestic crisis for the regime without ending Syria's regional and international isolation.

Understanding Regime Resilience and its Limits

The erosion of its traditional constituencies practically condemned the regime to follow the trends set in Tunisia and Egypt. However, Asad has turned the formal and informal power structures to his advantage. The complex intertwined power relations in the regime and its strong and organically connected ruling establishment has enabled the regime to maintain elite cohesion and minimize institutional defection. The informal power structures in the intelligence units, special military forces and the Ba'th Party make the regime less constrained by formal state institutions. Consequently, whereas other regimes in the region quelled domestic upheavals by working out new elite and opposition bargains, the Syrian regime seems resilient even if it lacks such options of adaptation essential in crises. The ruling coalition has accordingly regarded security measures as the

only bulwark against regime disintegration, leaving the regime to face an opposition it can neither co-opt nor crush.

How can we account for such regime resilience? Why, for instance, did the Syrian regime not follow the example of Egypt where the military establishment replaced the presidential institution or used its power to avoid the disintegration of the regime? Here, institutional level analysis is needed to understand the Asad regime's resilience and structural intransigence.

Regime-Level Explanation: Civil-military relations

Egypt's civil-military dynamics are illuminating when contrasted with those in Syria. Although the military establishment in Egypt used to be considered the backbone of the regime after the Free Officers overthrew the monarchy in 1952, the military had not played a direct political role in Egyptian politics and regime preservation since the early 1970s. The military establishment was politically marginalized after its defeat in 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The depoliticization of the military accelerated after Sadat came to power in 1970 with the 'demilitarization' of the Cabinet and bureaucracy – their ranks were filled with civilian technocrats – and the liberalization of parts of the state-owned and military-controlled public sector.[20] The political neutralization of the military enhanced its professional image, as if it was the servant of the state rather than the regime.[21] Significantly, just as limited political 'pluralism' was introduced the ruling National Democratic Party served as the main vehicle of elite co-optation while the presidency was omnipotent.

Egypt's homogenous society, virtually free of significant ethnic or sectarian cleavages, relieved the regime from seeking mass mobilization by institution expansion that required the ruling party to penetrate the coercive apparatus and bureaucracy. This allowed the ruler in Egypt to offer some semblance of political freedom while 'power was still heavily concentrated in the hands of the president'.[22] Nor did the regime have to adhere to populist and nationalist ideologies to maintain its legitimacy. The regime could set its rules of electoral participation to co-opt important opposition elements, such as the Islamists, suppressed and yet allowed to participate in the political process as long as they abided by the regime's rules. Meanwhile, the presidency was the pinnacle of power with almost the only constraint on executive authority in Egypt coming from external quarters such as the USA and international financial institutions (mainly the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund).[23] And while Egypt's presidency represented centralized authority, it used the National Democratic Party to extend economic and political networks of patronage and co-opt the elite and opposition.

In Syria, the regime counts on a wider set of state institutions with more power-sharing mechanisms and a larger scope of co-optation. As Hinnebusch notes, the Ba'th Party and the presidency share power that rests on three overlapping pillars: 'the party apparatus, the military-police establishment and the ministerial bureaucracy. Through these interlocking institutions, the top political elite seeks to settle intra-elite conflicts and design public policy, and through their command posts, to implement policy and control society'.[24] The Ba'th Party apparatus penetrates all state institutions and civil society organizations while the party's military organization exercises political control over its military members.[25] Hence, the ruling coalition and the political system in Syria are far more institutionally interlocked than their counterparts in other authoritarian Arab regimes. As such, preserving the integrity of the coalition becomes critical to the

survival of the regime and its institutions.

To survive in such a structure, other institutions also strive to maintain their co-optative capacity. Thus, elite co-optation is not the burden of the ruling party alone, as in Egypt, but an onus on all state institutions that must directly recruit support for the regime. In short, the regime 'overcomes' the heterogeneity of Syrian society and opposition by creating its opposite – a cohesive unitary regime. Such a coalition makes it difficult for anyone to attempt a coup without risking his own survival. This explains why the 'Egyptian scenario' has been unavailable to Syria over the past 18 months of unrest, and why no state institution has attempted to take over the presidency to ride out the crisis.

Another crucial feature of regime cohesion is the unquestioning support the regime receives from the coercive apparatus and the ruling inner circle, a highly sectarian institution that is tightly controlled and represented by the Asad clan. This has been ensured by the presence of highly trained and loyal units inside the military and the security services, such as the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division. Their carefully selected leaders are commanded by officers who belong to the president's own family and clans such as the Makhloufs and Shaleeshs.[26] Indeed all key posts in the military and security services are controlled by closely related families. For instance, the president's brother, Maher, commands the Republican Guard (an elite force whose six brigades protect the regime from domestic threats) and heads the fourth armed division (one of the army's best equipped and most highly trained forces). The president's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, who was killed in a bomb blast in July 2012, was the former commander of the intelligence agency and deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian military.

In the past decade, the concentration of power in Bashar al-Asad's inner core had been accompanied by the regime's growing dependence on security services for state control. Moreover, as the majority of defecting soldiers during the current unrest are Sunni, more and more Alawites are forcibly brought in, and the elite army units practically act as Alawite militias. Some Alawites oppose the regime's brutal suppression. Still, the fate of these militias is bound up with the survival of the regime because they fear reprisals should the regime fall. Their fear has prompted the rise of the initially armed Alawite youths, Shabbiha, who became the vanguard of the regime's response to dissent. It would take more than the overthrow of the president for the regime to fall: it would require the disintegration of those highly trained and equipped army units. But with the institutionalized state threatened with disintegration, the ruling elites find themselves even less prepared or willing to make political compromises that could end the violence.

The Significance of Political Economy

Building a cohesive business class/private sector was another important pillar of regime resilience. Selective liberalization kept the influential business class totally dependent on its relationship with state officials for benefits and privileged contracts. At the Ba'th's Tenth Regional Command Conference in 2005, Bashshar sought to counter the eroding populist policies and the declining role of the public sector with 'socialist market economy'. However, the 'socialist' *infitah*, which ended decades of socialism and gave entrepreneurs easy access to the economy, challenged the regime's traditional economic, political and ideological legacy. The high unemployment rate, housing crisis and the spread of urban slums became a time bomb that threatened security and stability.[27] With the

regime's traditional constituency and state institutions exposed to market forces, the established alliance between the regime and the peasants and workers was sorely strained.

Instead a newly empowered mafia-like alliance of pro-regime capitalists and bureaucrats emerged as the principal beneficiary of patronage. These new social climbers have become the target of animosity among the less privileged classes in a country where extravagant displays of wealth were unknown in recent memory.[28] Even though the regime had to yield some important components of its political legitimacy – collective ideology and egalitarian policies – the regime would not open up the political system. Rather social alliances were shifting under authoritarian rule, as Salwa Ismail observes:

> families and clans tied to the regime have become major economic actors. For instance, Rami Makhlouf, the president's maternal cousin, has a virtual monopoly over mobile phone services, the running of the duty free markets on Syria's borders, the country's top private English language school, sole representation of Schindler elevators and various restaurant chains. Others, who enjoyed similar privileges, include the son of Mustafa Tlas, sons of 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the son of Bahjat Sulaiman (the head of the internal security until June 2005), the Shalishes (cousins of the president) and other immediate members of the Asad family as well as members of the extended clan.[29]

Thus, the networks of patronage have been narrowed down to influential families rather than party members. It is no wonder then that Rami Makhlouf was the focus of the current protest movement in its early stage which forced the regime to state that Makhouf had quit business and channeled his wealth into charity and development projects. Even so, as Perthes comments:

> A combination of political incapacitation and de-politicization, open repression, and selective incorporation, the regime has managed to keep the civil-society threat at bay… as long as the security architecture holds, alternative power centers cannot merge, clientelism continues to fragment key societal groups, discontent remains unorganized, and social demands can be dealt with selectively; the ability of the regime to act, by and large, on its own preferences is not in question.[30]

In addition, the select rich urban bourgeoisie, the Sunni Damascene in particular, now has a direct interest in preserving stability and their relations with the regime as long as their businesses prosper.[31] The regime's selective liberalization had created a cohesive business class that is organically linked with the regime. According to Bassam Haddad four levels of state bourgeoisie dominate and control the state economy and extend their patronage networks into the public and private sectors. The first and most powerful segment of the state economic elite is drawn mainly from the ranks of the top regime leadership and these individuals who are united by their direct relations with the ruling family. Although these individuals control the public sectors such as oil, they largely derive their wealth from relatively recent entries into lucrative private sector markets, including those of communication, information technology, car dealerships and the free market zones that were liberalized and expanded in 2003. The second most powerful level of state bourgeoisie belongs to the army and security services. This category includes top generals and heads of the nine major security apparatuses, their deputies, underlings and former heads of security.

These individuals have parlayed coercive power, and, in some cases, their institutional positions into considerable wealth. Most of their offspring have opted for private careers since the mid- to late 1990s, and they form a significant familial power and financial bloc among the state bourgeoisie. Hence, it is difficult to separate between the public and the private sectors. The third category comprises the administrative and bureaucratic sectors. Within this category are several hundred top civil servants, Cabinet members and their deputies, provincial governors and high-profile mayors, and heads of labor and peasant unions. These people have been steadily moving into the private sector. The fourth category is made up of former and current high-level economic public sector managers and bureaucrats who have most successfully entered the private sector and can compete effectively given their ties to the core elite.[32]

Therefore, the public sector has been transformed into a cohesive private sector whose members, too, shelter under the umbrella of the regime and cannot survive without the protection of the state apparatuses. In a sense, the regime did not spawn a new business class, as had emerged in Egypt with the rise of Gamal Mubarak and his associates. The lack of alterative avenues has made businesses dependent on the regime and thus loyal to it. Besides, the regime's intentional policy of avoidance of commercial linkages with the institutions of international capitalism has likewise maintained an alliance of the business class with the regime and state officials. This alliance seems to have endured: Damascus and Aleppo were largely immune to unrest until the Free Syrian Army moved its battle to urban cities.

The corrosive social effects of these changes of political economy had in fact been seen in the 'mid-decade outbreak of several localized sectarian/tribal conflicts, which manifested an erosion of the regime control' before the current unrest began.[33] Ironically the onset of the uprising in 2011 recalled the pre-Ba'thist period when the rural regions were deprived and marginalized and regime-connected figures and beneficiaries dominated the economy and benefitted from the political and economic arrangements that advocated urban development at the expense of the countryside.

Making Sense of the Ongoing Violence in Syria

To understand the current violence in Syria, one has to think about the nature of state violence against the population in the four preceding decades. Violence has been an essential tool of Ba'thist rule, mostly under the Asad family. Since the ascendance of the Ba'th party in 1963, Syria has been under emergency rule which suspends all rights and liberties. How Asad maintains his rule may be illustrated by two example of regime violence – the Hama massacre of 1982 and the existence of "incommunicado" detention centers and military prisons where torture, ill treatment and dehumanizing conditions are widespread.[34]

Everyone in Syria, regardless of sect or race, whether activist, Islamist or not, is in danger of physical disappearance once he/she utters anything in opposition to the political or ideological orientation of the Ba'thist regime or discusses the freedom of expression. As it were, a permanent state of war exists between the regime and the opposition such that the current violence is akin to a continuation of war that existed beneath forty years of "stability and peace" under the Asad rule. The regime's response to the uprising and the demands of the people since March 2011 displays

the same mentality that caused the regime to crush the opposition to its rule in Hama in 1982 by totally destroying the city and massacring its population. A similar scenario looms but this time it involves larger and geographically more dispersed segments of the population. Under Asad's "peace and stability", hundreds of thousands were tortured and kept in detention centers. Thousands "disappeared" before the 2011 uprising. With that the regime set the rules of its power relations vis-à-vis the Syrian population and practically destroyed any prospect for the emergence of political society in Syria. By institutionalizing violence the regime polarized the people between those wholly loyal and totally submissive, and the opposition. In other words, the Arab Spring might have been the trigger for the current uprising but even more so it could have been the regime's initial reaction of torturing and killing the children who wrote graffiti against Asad rule on the walls of their school. The uprising was sparked by the defiance of any further dehumanization of the population.

As with the other movements of the Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising began peacefully and remained so for more than four months. But the Syrian regime took two lessons from the uprisings elsewhere. The regime considered, first, that the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes were too slow in confronting the protestors, and, second, the peaceful nature of the protest movements gained great momentum, delegitimized the use of force against them, and thereby attracted millions of participants. To that extent, the Syrian regime perversely regarded the peaceful character of its domestic uprising to be most dangerous because it channeled new blood and force, even among those who had very little to do with politics, into a newly emerging political society. Drawing strength from its peacefulness and legitimate demands against corruption and authoritarianism, the uprising attracted people from all sects and classes of Syrian society and spread to a larger geographical setting. Some of the protestors' best remembered slogans were "One, one, one – the Syrian people are one" and "peaceful, peaceful… even if they (security forces) killed every day one hundred of us!"

The security forces lost their patience with a non-violent protest movement that delegitimized the use of force against the people. The regime resorted to using two tactics. First, its official propaganda raised the specter of sectarianism by highlighting armed gangs, *Salafi* militants and foreign conspiracies, and spread rumors of sectarian attacks among various communities in villages and cities. Second, the regime militarized the uprising by using excessive violence in order to justify large-scale military operations and discourage the opposition from joining the protest movement. By doing so, the regime was able to push part of the protest into the field most familiar to the regime: military confrontation. As a result of the militarization, the regime made its own survival the only guarantee of regional stability. The protracted stalemate invited regional mobilization and soon regional actors exercised their financial and military influence in Syria by supporting different armed groups in pursuit of their own interests. Consequently, the Syrian problem has become a regional one and the Asad regime ceased to be seen as the only cause of regional instability. This situation undercut the initial demands of the popular uprising while regional and international support was channeled to armed groups on the ground. The escalation of violence has caused a huge humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighboring countries. By now, more than 40,000 people have been killed, more than 40,000 people "disappeared" and hundreds of thousands injured. Millions have been displaced and there are now hundreds of thousands of refugees. Daily the state infrastructure is damaged and villages and cities are destroyed. With the militarization of the Syrian crisis, the opposing forces will hardly understand the language of

political transition to democracy in the years to come.

The existing power structure, which made the Syrian regime resilient and sustained its cohesion so far, simultaneously constrains its scope for reform and its ability to formulate political arrangements that can urgently respond to domestic challenges without waging a war against its opponents and society at large. The dilemma is that the security strategy cannot offer a workable solution to the current crisis in which a struggle for survival continues in Syria's main cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Indiscriminate regime crackdowns have forced members of Syrian society into learning how to defend themselves and to cross social, economic and communal boundaries. However, the performance of the external political opposition and its fragmentation are a cause for concern if the opposition were to play any essential role in a post-Asad transition. The opposition has so far failed to unite around a political program for post-Asad Syria. In the end, it is not only about toppling a regime but also about uprooting the current system which "is based on keeping Syrians hostage to communal divisions and regional power plays."[35]

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