

## OTORİTER DİRENÇ VE ARAB BAHARI: KARŞILAŞTIRMALI PERSPEKTİFTE SURİYE

### ÖZ

Bu makale, otoriter direnç ve uyarlama literatürü ışığında Suriye İsyanı'nın kökenlerini ve farklılığını incelemektedir. İsyanın kökenleri, Suriye'nin otoriter popülist devlet-inşa formülünün kırılma noktasına uzanmaktadır. Beşar Esad döneminde Suriye'nin post-popülist dönüşümü, söz konusu kırılma noktalarının "onarılması" anlamına gelse de, büyük çaplı toplumsal hoşnutsuzluklara neden oldu; "otoriter uyarlama", tüm bu olumsuz yan etkilerin zararını gidermek anlamına gelse de, aslında kendi maliyetleri olan bir süreç. Suriye İsyanı'nın kendine has özellikleri, Mısır ve Libya örnekleriyle hoşnutsuzluk düzeyleri ve rejim-karşıtı mobilizasyon için fırsat yapıları üzerinden sistematik bir biçimde karşılaştırarak incelemektedir. Suriye İsyanı'nın belirgin farklılığı --çıkmaz ve uzun süreli çatışma-- bir ölçüde Suriye rejiminin otoriter uyarlamanın farklılığıyla açıklanabilir.

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Suriye İsyanı, otoriter uyarlama, post-popülist otoriterlik, Beşar Esad*

### المقاومة السلطوية والربيع العربي: سوريا في الرؤية المقارنة بقلم: رايموند هينابوش خلاصة:

تنهك سياسة الشرق الأوسط بمقولة "الجهاد" بسبب دوره الذي يجري تنشيطه في معرض الفعاليات العسكرية. والجهاد مفهوم قرآني، ويعني ذلك عدم إمكان تفسير المصطلح الذي يتم تعريفه في الكتاب المقدس وفق القواعد الإسلامية مجدداً. ورغم المعنى الواضح لهذا المصطلح في القرآن، فإن الفاعلين السياسيين يعملون على تحويره وفقاً للظروف السياسية المتباينة. إن الحركات الإسلامية الراديكالية في يومنا هذا تفسر مفهوم الجهاد، خلافاً للمفهوم التقليدي له، على أنه يعني هدم النظام الدولي القائم، وإزالة الحدود القائمة بين المجتمعات الإسلامية، وإعادة العمل بقواعد الشريعة الإسلامية. أما التحول اللفظي من مفهوم الجهاد إلى مفهوم الوظيفة الجهادية، فإنه يظهر كيفية تطويع مفهوم الإسلام في الشرق الأوسط ليكون أداة سياسية. وتتولى هذه الدراسة تحليل المفاهيم المختلفة للجهاد ضمن الروابط التاريخية للزمان والمكان، كما توضح كيفية استعمال مفهوم الجهاد عبر أحقاب التاريخ كسياسة دولة، وكأداة تعليمية، وكسبب لعشرات من الحروب واحتلال البلدان والفتوحات وحركات التمرد، وذلك بأساليب وأشكال متعددة جداً.

*الكلمات الدالة: الجهاد، الجهاد كمنهنة، تكوين المفاهيم، الإسلام السياسي.*

# **AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE AND THE ARAB UPRISING: SYRIA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the roots and tangent of the Syrian Uprising in the light of the literature on authoritarian resilience and upgrading. The roots of the Uprising are located in the vulnerabilities of Syria's authoritarian populist state-building formula. Its post-populist transition under Bashar al-Asad, although meant to "fix" these vulnerabilities, generated powerful mass grievances; authoritarian upgrading, although meant to compensate for these negative side effects, had also its own costs. The special features of the Syrian Uprising are explained by systematically comparing levels of grievances and opportunity structure for anti-regime mobilization there to the Egyptian and Libyan cases. The distinct tangent of the Syrian Uprising--stalemate and protracted conflict--can, in part, be explained by the Syrian regime's particular authoritarian upgrading tangent.

*Keywords: Syria, Syrian Uprising, authoritarian upgrading, Post-populist authoritarianism, Bashar al-Asad*

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In the initial months of the Arab uprisings, the post-democratization literature on MENA, which had stressed the apparent resilience of authoritarian rule in the region, was widely criticized; its apparent confidence in the stability of authoritarian regimes had, it was charged, debilitated its capacity to even imagine the possibility of the uprisings. While this criticism is at best partly true of the specific literature on “authoritarian upgrading” (AU), the somewhat earlier literature on “post-populist” authoritarianism (PPA) in MENA did identify the roots of instability; authoritarian upgrading can, in this context, be interpreted as regimes’ efforts to stay ahead of the de-stabilizing factors inherent in the turn to post-populism. Moreover, both of these literatures can sensitize us to *variations* in factors making for the Arab Uprising: the pre-uprising situation in regimes like Egypt, well advanced on its pro-Western post-populist tangent, appears, at first sight, quite different than that in Syria, which ostensibly had taken a somewhat different authoritarian upgrading strategy, applied in a different societal and regional context. Once Mubarak fell, the uprising did indeed spread to Syria but it took a very different tangent and the literature on authoritarianism upgrading can also give us explanations for these differences. Finally, although the point will not be addressed in this paper, the outcome of the uprisings, either hybrid or failed regimes rather than democratization, suggests that the authoritarian resilience paradigm may still hold considerable validity.

## The Roots of the Arab Uprisings

### *The Dilemma of Populist Authoritarianism*

The roots of the Arab Uprising need to be traced back to state formation in the Uprising states and, in particular, to the *populist authoritarian* (PA) formula of regime formation in the republics. Why did the Arab republics, compared to the monarchies, prove so vulnerable to the Uprising? This is because they all shared something, namely, that they built their power and legitimacy on a distinctive formula that had become increasingly dysfunctional. The PA republics consolidated themselves through revolutions from above that overthrew the agrarian capitalist oligarchy through nationalizations and land reform, and incorporated worker and peasant support through a populist social contract. Enjoying neither electoral nor traditional legitimacy, PA regimes sought legitimacy through anti-imperialist foreign policies and delivery of jobs and welfare. Because, however, the PA states could not sustain capital accumulation, they all faced the need to revitalize the private sector and encourage foreign investment; this, however, required they privilege investors and abandon the populist social contract and, to achieve integration into the world capitalist economy, also to abandon anti-imperialism. This imperative could only be escaped or delayed if regimes had access to rent from oil or aid and alternative Eastern markets. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the main sources of aid/rent were in the West, which required a Westward foreign policy realignment and

peace with Israel. Dealing with the loss of popular support and legitimacy inherent in these imperatives required some kind of “authoritarian upgrading.”

### ***Seeds of the Arab Uprising: Post-Populist Authoritarian Upgrading***

Across the region projects to “upgrade” authoritarianism took very similar forms, amply documented in the literature.<sup>1</sup> The underlying deep change was a movement from an originally populist form of authoritarianism to “post-populist” (or neo-liberal) versions.<sup>2</sup> Authoritarian power was now used, not to level oligarchies as in the populist era, but to pursue economic liberalization and thereby reconstruct new inequalities: thus, ruling elites used pressures for privatization from international financial institutions to appropriate public sector assets for themselves, and to enrich presidential families, ministers and the private investors allied with them in “networks of privilege”<sup>3</sup>

How was this transition managed without incurring rebellion by those who lost out—public sector workers, land reform peasants, the poor? Authoritarian persistence cannot be explained by coercion alone and indeed, the logic of authoritarian rule is to *include* some social forces in order to *exclude* others: if populist authoritarian regimes included the workers and peasants in order to marginalize the old oligarchy, “post-populism” refers to the *strategic* shift in the political economy of regimes toward including new crony capitalists and excluding regimes’ former populist constituencies. “Authoritarian upgrading” denotes the *tactical* techniques by which regimes tried to manage this transition without destabilizing their rule. Heydemann, et.al. and King showed how ruling elites used privatization as a source of patronage to build new bases of support substituting for the old populist coalition. The parallel literature on hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism stressed how limited political liberalization facilitated authoritarian persistence<sup>4</sup> thus, Glasser

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1 Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World: Analysis Paper No. 13* (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007); H Albrecht and O Schlumberger, “Waiting fo Godot: Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East,” *International Political Science Review*, Vol.25, No.4, 2004, pp., 371-92

2 Raymond Hinnebusch, “Liberalization without Democratization in ‘Post-populist’ Authoritarian States: Evidence from Syria and Egypt,” in Nils Butenschon, Uri Davis and Manuel Hassassian (eds.), *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, 2000; Martha Pripstein-Posusney *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions and Economic Restructuring*, 1979); Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma Murphy, “The Transformation of the Corporatist State in the Middle East,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1996; Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, *The Arab State and Neo-liberal Globalization: the Restructuring of the State in the Middle East* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009); Stephan King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009).

3 Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York: Palgrave: Macmillan, 2004).

4 Ellen Lust-Okar, “Divided they rule: The management and manipulation of political opposition”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol.36, No.2. 2004; Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule* (2004).

showed how regimes fostered pro-regime parties supportive of neo-liberalism;<sup>5</sup> Lust-Okar and Kassem showed how regimes learned to divide and rule by selectively including and excluding political groups from participation in semi-competitive elections; and King showed how dominant ruling parties maintained the corporatist networks first established under populism but now to dis-empower and demobilize rather than mobilize workers and peasants. Heydemann's "authoritarian upgrading" formula stressed how post-populist regimes tried to compensate for abandoning their mass constituencies by tapping new resources from investors, diversifying their constituencies (to the business class and the ulama), deployed co-optation and divide and rule strategies, and offloading welfare responsibilities to private forces and civil society, while re-regulating state-society relations so as to keep control over these newly empowered forces outwith the regime's institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The seeds of rebellion are to be found in this transition. On the one hand, *post-populist* transition, although meant to "fix" certain vulnerabilities in *populist* versions of authoritarianism, generated powerful mass grievances; on the other hand, authoritarian upgrading, although meant to contain and compensate for these negative side effects had also its own negative side effects. What the Arab Uprisings exposed was that every enhancement from AU of authoritarian resilience also had cumulative costs, which, indeed, contained the identifiable seeds of the Arab Uprising.

However, even if all the republics did, to one degree or another, change to follow this tangent, variations in their societies and their particular populist and post-populist formulas, made for different levels of vulnerability to uprising and also help explain the two main alternative post-Uprising pathways, namely, those where discredited presidents quickly departed (Tunisia, Egypt) but regimes remained intact and those where leaders remained highly resistant to removal and protracted conflict, sliding into civil war, resulted (Libya, Yemen, Syria).

What explains such variations in outcomes? Two broad master variables, each of which has sub-components, may be useful in helping us to think systematically about the possibility of regime change in general and outcomes of the Arab Uprising in particular: 1) *level of grievance* and 2) the *opportunity structure* for rebellion, which is determined by the relative power balance between state and society. Put together, these variables allow for four scenarios that shape quite different outcomes. 1) Where grievances are low and the opportunity structure is low, because the state-society balance favours the regime, there should be no Uprising (Saudi Arabia, Qatar). 2) Where grievances are low (legitimacy high) and the opportunity structure high, conditions might

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5 Bradley Louis Glasser, *Economic Development and Political Reform: The Impact of External Capital on the Middle East* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2001).

6 Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World: Analysis Paper No. 13* (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007).

be best for a Turkey-like democratization from above. 3) Where grievances are high and the opportunity structure low, rebellion is likely both to happen and to be repressed by regimes (as in Syria in the 1980s and Algeria in the 1990s). 4) Where grievances are high and the opportunity structure shifts to society, mass mobilization can be rapid and effective and presidents quickly ousted (Egypt, Tunisia). In *mixed* cases, Uprisings where there is enough grievance to produce an Uprising and enough opportunity structure for rebellion to be sustained but not enough of either to rapidly remove the regime, the outcome is *protracted conflict*, with extended *stalemates* between regime and opposition.

Table 1 scores Egypt, Libya and Syria on the explanatory variables. Egypt fits case 4, but Libya and Syria are mixed cases. Conditions for the uprising, in retrospect, appear to have been best in Egypt (and to a lesser extent Tunisia) because grievances were high but also because the opportunity structure was shifting toward society. Why were grievances high? Egypt and Tunisia were the poster children of the IMF, the supposed success cases of neo-liberal reform. As authoritarian republics, their legitimacy had initially rested on populism and nationalism but they had gradually exhausted it without finding a substitute. Neo-liberal policies led to big socio-economic inequalities, excluding former populist constituencies. On the one hand, there were attacks on the living standard of the poor and state-employed middle class under the label of structural adjustment through reduction of food subsidies, reducing state employment of graduates, hollowing out of public education and health, and abolishing traditional labour rights in industry, leading to mass redundancies; in Egypt the end of the Nasserite agrarian relations law made a million peasants homeless. At the same time, enrichment of ruling elites, especially the presidential family, had become notorious; for example, privatization involved selling public companies at below market prices to a small group of crony capitalists—often friends of Mubarak and involved in Gamal Mubarak's policies committee within the ruling National Democratic Party—which grouped the biggest business oligarchs in the country. By 2000, 138 state-owned enterprises had been sold for less than \$8 billion, with many purchases made by unsupported, never repaid, loans from state owned banks. Public monopolies were thereby transformed into private ones. At the same time, subsidies and job security were cut for ordinary people and the tax burden shifted from the rich to the middle class. This was exacerbated by foreign policy submission to the US: loss of nationalist legitimacy from collaboration with the West in various respects such as the war on terrorism and the 2003 war on Iraq, culminated in Mubarak's collaboration with the Israel blockade of Gaza. For a decade chronic pro-democracy and pro-Palestinian protests by the middle class and worker and peasant protests over privatization and land dispossession had been on-going, expressive of profound mass disillusionment with the regime but also a relatively high associative capacity in civil society. At the same time, the rather homogeneous settled societies in Egypt and Tunisia posed few communal obstacles to collective action, change to allowing mobilization on class grounds that quickly converged on the capital cities, the centres of power. Because neither

president had been able to stack the army with tribally- or kin-recruited loyalists, as was common in more tribal or communally divided societies, its loyalty proved wanting in the face of mass protest. Exactly why the protests acquired unstoppable momentum erupted in 2010 or not before could be related to the deepened penetration of the Internet and the demonstration effect in Tunisia.

Initially, few thought the Uprising would spread to Syria, in spite of the double demonstration effects of Tunisia and Egypt, because the grievance level and opportunity structures both seemed lower. Bashar al-Assad himself famously told the *Financial Times* that Syria was not Egypt because his foreign policy was congruent with public opinion. The regime had pursued a nationalist foreign policy meant to win legitimacy and its stand during the Iraq war in particular, but also its support for Hezbollah and Hamas in their confrontations with Israel (in striking contrast to Mubarak's perceived collaboration with Israel against them) had won Bashar al-Asad considerable support, with regional polls showing him to be quite popular compared to other Arab leaders.

**Table 1: The Ingredients of Uprising.**<sup>7</sup>

I. Grievances: High grievances = higher vulnerability to Uprising	Egypt	Libya	Syria
1. Extent of leadership de-legitimation--from either excessive tenure, corruption, engineering of dynastic succession, or identity conflicts	High	High	Medium-High
2. Extent of regime nationalist de-legitimation--from alignment with the US, separate peace with Israel	High	Medium	Low
3. Extent of neoliberal restructuring--degree of structural adjustment, privatization, hollowing out of public services, reduction of labour protections, tax cuts and incentives for investors, etc.	High	Medium	Medium
4. Extent of ruling family aggrandizement--degree of concentration of wealth and opportunities in the presidential family at the expense of other elites.	High	High	High

<sup>7</sup> The factors and scoring in the table are inspired by an article by Bassam Haddad which examined the prospects that the Uprising would spread to Syria by comparing conditions to Egypt and Libya : "Why Syria is not next—so far," 9 March 2011, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/844/why-syria-is-not-next-.-.-so-far\\_with-arabic-translation-](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/844/why-syria-is-not-next-.-.-so-far_with-arabic-translation-)

5. Extent of crony capitalist wealth concentration conspicuous enrichment alongside mass impoverishment and increased inequality and poverty.	High	Medium	Medium
II. Opportunity Structure: high regime capacity = low opportunity structure for anti-regime movements			
1. Regime cohesion (vs. elite factionalism, readiness to abandon the president)	Medium	Low	High
2. Strength and reliability of security forces (vs. extent of institutional autonomy of the armed forces from the president, hence interests distinct from the presidency/regime inner circle)	Medium	Low	High
3. Infrastructural penetration of society: extent of bureaucratic or party penetration of the periphery, ability to deliver services and maintain surveillance (vs. inability to penetrate and control the peripheries).	Medium	Low	Medium
4. Immunity to foreign influence (vs. foreign dependency, potentially constraining tactics of the security forces).	Low	High	High
5. Extent of authoritarian upgrading: extent to which regimes are able to co-opt new constituencies with resources, such as bourgeoisies, or divide and rule them (oppositions, ulama) to prevent combinations against it.	High	Low	Medium
6. Extent of civil society atomization/demobilization potential vs. civil society with enough density and autonomy to give people associative experience beyond primordial solidarities).	Low	High	High
7. IT penetration	High	Low	Medium
8. Fragmented society, obstructing mass mobilization vs. homogeneous society facilitating it.	Low	Medium	High

Moreover, the regime had delivered stability, sparing Syria the sectarian chaos in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, the showcases of American-imposed democratization, which seemed to allow the regime to discredit the West's de-



mocracy discourses. Compared to Egypt, Syria's neo-liberalism was recent and mass impoverishment was much shallower. According to Syria watchers such as Bassam Haddad and Carsten Wieland,<sup>8</sup> Syria went into the crisis with advantages lacking elsewhere. Unlike his overthrown counterparts, elderly and in power for decades, Bashar was young and had only been in power for a decade, still enjoying the benefit of the doubt and widely seen as preferable to alternatives in the regime. In significant ways, therefore, Bashar al-Asad had pursued a special and distinctive version of authoritarian upgrading that appeared to position him favourably after his first decade in power. To be sure, the Syrian regime suffered from one liability that was absent in Egypt and Tunisia: in Syria's identity fragmented society, disproportionate power in the hands of the Alawi minority constantly reproduced grievances among the Sunni majority that could be eased by various forms of cross-sectarian co-optation, but never fully overcome. The opportunity structure, however, appeared lower in Syria precisely owing to this same feature of Syrian society and politics. In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, the senior commanders of the army and the security forces were tightly interlocked via primordial *assabiya* with the Alawi political elite and could not be readily separated from the regime; these forces were also far stronger and more cohesive than Qaddafi's forces in Libya. According to Haddad, compared to Libya, the regime in Syria still had links to society, especially to the business class that Bashar had cultivated, and the ulama that the regime also had worked assiduously to co-opt, thereby seemingly neutralizing these traditional centres of opposition to the Ba'th; on the other hand, he argued, Egypt's larger public space and more developed civil society, opposition parties and press, that had prepared the ground for collective action, had no parallels in Syria's more repressive political climate and underdeveloped civil society.

In summary, it appears from the balance of grievance and opportunity in 2010 that the spread of the Uprising to Syria was not inevitable; it also appears that conditions were unfavourable for the rapid success of an Uprising on the Egyptian model, and, of course, the outcome has indeed been a very different tangent of protracted armed conflict. Why the Uprising happened and led to stalemate rather than the "fall of the regime" requires some further explanation and arguably, part of the explanation must be found in theories of post-populist authoritarian upgrading.

## Post-Populist Development in Syria

### *Populist Vulnerabilities in Syria*

When we look closer at Syria's version of authoritarian upgrading, we find that despite certain differences, there were also definite similarities to other

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8 Carsten Wieland, 'Syria: a tale of missed opportunity,' *OpenDemocracy*, 4 October 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/carsten-wieland/syria-tale-of-missed-opportunity>

cases. As elsewhere, AU both allowed the regime to “fix” vulnerabilities inherited from the populist era and also generated new vulnerabilities. Ba’thist populism’s special vulnerability was dominance of the regime by Alawi officers in a Sunni-majority society; this was initially overcome by nationalization and land reform, which broke the dominance of the Sunni oligarchy and gave the regime the means to win over popular constituencies, notably Sunni peasants. Stability, however, was only achieved when Hafiz al-Asad concentrated power in a Presidential monarchy, backed by Alawi clients commanding key military and intelligence machinery, which nevertheless shared power with a cross-sectarian elite, and rested on party and bureaucratic institutions which incorporated a cross-sectarian rural constituency. The regime achieved a measure of legitimacy on nationalist grounds, notably from the 1973 war and the on-going struggle with Israel, and also from a “social contract” in which political loyalty was contingent on regime delivery of material benefits to its constituency. In parallel, though, it could never relax its repressive control over the half of society, mostly Islamist, unreconciled to Alawi-Ba’th rule.

This neo-patrimonial state, mixing traditional practices, notably clientalism, and modern bureaucratic instruments, required significant revenues to sustain itself; the public sector was used to provide populist benefits such as jobs and subsidized food and patronage for the regime constituency, but, as a result, it failed as an engine of capital accumulation and investment needed to expand the economy in parallel to relentless population growth (itself encouraged by the “premature Keynesianism”<sup>9</sup> inherent in the “social contract”). Private capital fled the country or refrained from investment except in quick-profit tertiary sectors. The state, overdeveloped relative to its economic base, generated a permanent fiscal deficit that could only be sustained by external ‘rent.’ Hafiz al-Asad deftly used his nationalist foreign policy, making Syria a front line state with Israel, to access aid from the Arab Gulf states and Iran and cheap arms from the Soviet Union.

The cumulative economic vulnerabilities of the system were, however, exposed by the economic slump of the late 1980s which was met by an austerity policy that starved the public sector, froze social benefits and slashed the earning power of the state-employed middle class; a new investment law was promulgated to entice private and foreign investment to supplement the declining public sector. Together, these measures revived the private sector, thus appeasing the bourgeoisie, parts of which were incorporated into the regime support base; the regime was thus starting on a post-populist tangent but it did not wholly renege on the social contract and continued, for example, to provide subsidized bread and agricultural inputs. However, in parallel with the fall of Syria’s Soviet patron, external aid declined and the Ba’th’s national-

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9 David Waldner, *State building and late development in Syria, Turkey, Korea and Taiwan*, (Ithaca, N.Y : Cornell University Press, 1999).

ist tangent now collided with the imperative to access inward investment as a substitute for aid. This contradiction was buffered by revenues from Syria's own modest oil fields, but these were also expected to decline in the 2000s; in the meantime, in the 1990s Syria pursued, under US auspices, the possibility of a peace settlement with Israel that would open the door to foreign aid and investment yet, also allow recovery of Syria's lost Golan territory, hence sustain nationalist legitimacy.

### *Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria*

According to Volker Perthes, Bashar al-Asad's project was to "modernize authoritarianism."<sup>10</sup> Regime survival required preserving the fiscal base of the state, hence reforming the economy by a move toward the market, and integration into the global world of the internet, cell phones, etc.; but such economic reform required consolidating the power of reformers within the regime and adapting Syria's nationalist foreign policy and its populist social contract to the requisites of capitalism without de-stabilizing the regime. The regime's post-populist upgrading proceeded on three parallel planes: 1) attempting economic reform, needed to preserve the regime revenue base, while also trying to minimize the damage to its social base and nationalist legitimacy; 2) the president's struggle to concentrate power against the resistance of the party/old guard to his reforms; 3) the regime's drive to control the political arena as it changed its social base. Bashar al-Asad initially appeared to deftly manage this balancing act, but in the end it proved beyond him.

*Balancing fiscal and legitimacy needs:* There was a certain contradiction between revenue needs and nationalist legitimacy. The two had gone together under Hafiz and might have continued to do so had a honourable peace with Israel (return of the Golan, Palestinian state) been reached which could have opened Syria to an influx of investment. However, the failure of the peace process led Syria to shift toward a foreign policy of "resistance" (opposing the invasion of Iraq, alignment with Iran, keeping control over Lebanon) which closed off the initially attempted avenue of reform via integration into the Western market, as symbolized by the nearly-signed association agreement with Europe. The regime used resistance to the US in Iraq and to Israel and Western efforts to dislodge it from Lebanon to generate nationalist legitimacy, but the consequent isolation from the West, notably over the Hariri murder, had economic costs. US-imposed sanctions, aiming to economically isolate Syria, discouraged Western investment and caused difficulties for the financial services and telecommunications industries by which the regime sought to propel the globalization of the Syrian economy.

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10 Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Papers (London: Oxford University Press for IISS, 2004).

This drove regime efforts to find alternative sources of revenues, made especially urgent by the gradual decline in Syria's oil exports as production stagnated and domestic consumption soared, attempted first through pre-Iraq war oil deals with Saddam Hussein, which antagonized Washington and were cut off after the US invasion. To counter isolation from the West, trade was switched toward Asia and also, particularly, Turkey through which Bashar sought back door access to Western economies; in parallel, tax cuts, much reduced import tariffs, currency liberalization and creation of a stock market and private banks were designed to attract expatriate capital and surplus liquidity from the Gulf. In fact, investment inflows drove a boom in trade, housing, banking, construction, and tourism, steadily increasing the proportion of GDP generated in the private sector and solidifying the support of the emerging new capitalist classes. *However, the drive to evade isolation and access resources meant that the "social contract" with the regime's traditional constituency was sacrificed.* While in principle the aim was a "social market" economy in which social protections were preserved during the move toward the market, in reality the policy pursued by Bashar's reforming technocrats headed by Abdullah Dardari was little distinguishable from neo-liberalism with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution. Economic liberalization removed former limits on corruption and the managers of the new banks and businesses earned high salaries, while taxation became regressive as reductions in taxes on higher incomes were compensated for by cuts in the subsidies that kept low income citizens from falling into extreme poverty. Public education and services were run down and parallel private ones for the rich sprang up. Agriculture was neglected and despoiled by drought, which propelled urban migration that, together with the influx of Iraqi refugees, exacerbated a housing crisis originating in the population boom and the increase in real estates prices from the influx of Gulf money. The conspicuous consumption by the new crony capitalists and their foreign partners alienated the regime's original rural constituency and the end to tariff protection devastated small manufacturers in the suburbs. Upward social mobility for lower class elements became blocked, causing resentment of the Alawis and crony capitalists who were perceived to corner the new opportunities. The need to trim a state overdeveloped on declining external rents and to foster the private sector and inward investment required a restructuring of the regime's social base away from its initial populist alliance; economic reform was therefore inescapable, but the need to evade the Western campaign of isolation meant it was artificially accelerated to produce quick results, with the result that measures to alleviate the hardship for ordinary people lagged behind and many unbalanced concessions were given to investors, for example, lowering of taxes and tariffs in deals with Gulf investors and Turkey.

*Concentrating power in the Presidential Clan:* Parallel to this move to post-populism, Bashar al-Asad sought to make the regime politically compatible with its changed socio-economic policy but, in the process, inadvert-

ently weakened it. His neo-patrimonial inheritance of leadership from his father appeared to succeed without significant legitimacy loss since Bashar was perceived as a reformer and appealed particularly to youth. However, this alienated key regime barons, such as Abdul Halim Khaddam, the long serving Vice-President. Bashar had to share power with the “old guard” entrenched in the party who were wary of his project. He tried to concentrate power in the presidency in an extended struggle with his rivals, using his powers of office to retire the elder generation; inserting his loyalists in the army and security forces; and, in a tug-of-war with the party leadership, appointing reforming technocrats to the council of ministers. Asad also engineered an attrition in Ba’th party leadership and cadres that culminated in the 2005 10<sup>th</sup> Syrian Party Congress when the old guard was swept from power. In uprooting these barons, Asad reduced obstacles to his reforms but also weakened powerful interests with clientele networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. This shrunk the scope of elites incorporated into the regime, making the President over-dependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons and technocrats lacking bases of support. His dependence on the Asad-Makhlouf family clan resulted in an over-concentration of patronage, opportunities and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients; the narrowing of loyalties from party to family core is a dangerous move for authoritarian regimes but one that was common across the region and a key grievance driving the Arab uprisings.

*Authoritarian Upgrading in the Political Arena:* Parallel to this, the political arena had to be managed in this transition. A main technique of authoritarian upgrading everywhere was the fostering of alternative constituencies that could be balanced against each other. The regime co-opted a new alliance of reforming technocrats and the business class, a powerful social force which was dependent on the state for opportunities (contracts, licenses) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism (e.g. labour rights). The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations, such as junior chambers of commerce. To provide a safety valve for discontent, critics of the regime were treated more leniently, even encouraged to voice constructive criticism, albeit within redlines highlighted by episodic instances of selective repression. Bashar al-Asad intensified his father’s strategy of fostering moderate (sufi) Islam as a counter to both radical Islamists and the secular opposition, resulting in the further spread of Islamic schools and charities, conservative attire, and mosque attendance. Islamist intellectuals and businessmen were co-opted into parliament and the ulama were permitted to manage the Islamic financial institutions allowed by the regime to attract Gulf money. Bashar also made a concerted effort to build alliances with the interlocked business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo. In parallel, efforts were made to off-load welfare responsibilities from the state and party to private charities.

Authoritarian upgrading chiefly took the form of co-optation, divide and rule and selective political decompression and little movement forward took place in incorporating institutionalized participation through parliament and a pluralized party system, which would have been needed to compensate for the shrinking of the regime's traditional populist political base and which had been followed in other Arab regimes, including Egypt. In repressing the Damascus Spring mounted by the secular opposition at the beginning of his presidency and the Damascus Declaration movement that revived this opposition in mid-decade, Asad passed up opportunities to co-opt the moderate opposition into an enlarged supportive coalition. Consolidating the political support of the new business class that was benefiting by regime policies would have required permitting a new bourgeois political party, perhaps launched under the auspices of loyal crony capitalists. At the same time, Asad, seeing the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, starved them of funds and attacked their patronage powers. This debilitated the regime's organized connection to its constituency and its penetration of neighbourhoods and villages. The gap was partly filled by the security services, which, however, were underpaid, corrupt and lax. While citizens would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access, increasingly they approached tribal, sectarian or religious notables, potential opponents of the regime. Thus the regime's ability to control and co-opt those gaining less or losing under the new order withered. In summary, authoritarian upgrading's lag behind post-populist change meant the regime had not sufficiently cultivated new constituencies to compensate for its old populist support base.

## **The Syrian Uprising**

As Bassam Haddad had anticipated the one thing that could spread the Arab Uprising to Syria was an over-reaction by the security forces, and this happened—in Dera where a confrontation between protestors and heavy-handed security forces escalated out of control. In the early days of the crisis, effective leadership from the president could still have made a difference, particularly had Asad reacted with democratic concessions instead of repression. However, his March 30, 2011 speech at the beginnings of the protests, in which he deprecated popular grievances, disillusioned the many who wanted him to use the crisis to advance reform. One explanation for his failure to better manage the crisis could be that, preoccupied with foreign policy and having become complacent owing to his success in surviving threats from the US and reversing isolation from Europe, he neglected the domestic vulnerabilities of his regime. Further, in the words of the International Crisis Group, the new generation of the ruling elite, 'having inherited power rather than fought for

it, grown up in Damascus, mingled with and mimicked the ways of the urban upper class' had lost touch with its social roots.<sup>11</sup>

Given the minority core of the regime, however, it may be Asad simply could not afford to make sufficient democratic concessions, especially with the debilitation of the regime's former cross-sectarian base. Had Bashar chosen to lead the reform process, he might have actually won a free election to another presidential term; but his rule had become a family regime, and the rest of the clan could well have been losers under democratization, especially the highly unpopular tycoon Rami Makhlouf and Maher al-Asad whose violent overreaction reflected the tribal mentality and minority complex of some Alawis in the regime. In the event, Asad chose to stand with the hardliners and to demonize the protestors as terrorists and radical Islamists as a way of rallying his minority core support and justifying his resort to repression. With the brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrators, what had started as localized protests demanding reform spiralled into a major uprising calling for overthrow of the regime; the resort to sectarian discourse and violence by regime and opposition would feed on each other escalating to the point that both sides soon went well beyond the point where a political solution was possible.

The Uprising took particular forms, both similar and different from those in other Uprising States. Among the similarities to other Uprisings was the key role of disenfranchised youth, the unemployed protestors outside the centres of prosperity. The urban middle class intellectuals that had mounted the Damascus Declaration tried to reactivate their networks, but they lacked popular bases and the initiative fell, as elsewhere, to informal youth networks. Diaspora activists played a pivotal role, using IT to generate opposition networks, deliver their message to the public and outside world (aiming to get the latter to constrain the regime's repression of the protests). As in other cases, also, protestors were able to mount sustained large-scale demonstrations that put the regime very much on the defensive.

The main difference from Egypt and Tunisia was that president was not quickly overthrown in a relatively brief and sharp burst of revolt quickly converging on the centre of power. Instead, a protracted conflict resulted. Different from Egypt but somewhat similar to Libya, the Uprising was geographically dispersed and away from the capital, beginning in the rural peripheries, then spreading to small towns, suburbs, and medium sized cities, where its foot soldiers were unemployed youth, refugees from drought and others among the "losers" of a decade of post-populist authoritarian upgrading. Medium and small sized traders and manufacturers, victims of trade liberalization and also resentful of the expansion of the Alawis from their domination

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11 International Crisis Group, 'The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution,' Brussels and Damascus, 6 July 2011.

of the military into business sectors appear to have been a main anti-regime force in the smaller urban centres.

The uprising had from the beginning a sectarian dimension, inevitable given the Alawi dominance of the regime and the concentration of the Uprising among the majority Sunnis. The main occasion for mobilization became Friday prayers, with internet-linked resistance committees springing up around mosques, for example the Omari mosque in Dera which was an early headquarters of protest, with their imams natural leaders of their neighbourhood and, outwith the main cities, mostly anti-regime. Saudi-financed salafi and Muslim Brotherhood connected elements actively mobilized protestors. Initial centres of grievances were mixed areas where Alawis and Sunni lived together as in Latakia, Baniyas and Homs. The uprising then spread to Hama and Deir az-Zur, traditional bastions of Sunni piety resentful of the regime. Tribes also played a role; the decline of the security forces' control of them thorough subsidies and exemptions and its replacement by Saudi money was important in the regime's loss of control over the tribal periphery.

There had been similar grievances among Sunnis in the early 1980s, but rebellion then was much more localized, so what had changed? Then many Sunni villages, still incorporated into the party, sided with the regime against the urban-based Muslim Brotherhood; however, in the 2000s, the party/peasant union infrastructure and rural services were debilitated, and agriculture neglected and devastated by years of drought. Population growth on fixed land resources had left peasant youth, whose fathers had been part of regime base, landless, dependent on entering a depressed non-agricultural job market, and "available" for anti-regime mobilization. Symptomatic of this, it was Dera, formerly a base of the Ba'th, where the Uprising began; there the loss of work opportunities in Lebanon, corruption and drought had encouraged salafism among unemployed youth; then, tribal reaction against the arrest of tribal youth and the extreme overreaction of the security forces was the spark that ignited the Uprising. Regime connections to the mass public, whether the ruling party or corporatist structures (trade unions, peasant unions), had withered in a way similar to the case in other Uprising states, but was especially dangerous in Syria if one considers how crucial this infrastructure was to allowing a minority-dominated Ba'th regime to consolidate its power in the first place.

The social base on which the regime relied to survive comprised the crony capitalists, urban government employees and the minorities, especially Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians who, not suffering from the restrictions on public religiosity and church building typical elsewhere, were rallied by exploiting their fear of salafi Islam. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where the investment boom, the takeoff of tourism and the new consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising, although their poor suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. The regime was able



to mobilize significant counter-demonstrations in these cities. The middle class of the two main cities originally saw Bashar as a reformer and while they were disillusioned by his repression of the protestors they preferred a peaceful democratization and feared instability and loss of their secular modern life style if traditional rural or salafi insurgents took power. Overt rebellion by ulama in the periphery did not spread to the main cities where the senior ulama were concentrated, as many had been co-opted and they took advantage of the uprising to win new concessions from the regime rather than abandoning it. The cooptation of the bourgeoisie on the regime side was similar to Egypt, although not Libya. But aggrandizement of the presidential family weakened its potential class support for the regime's neo-liberal tangent. Indeed, exiled businessmen who had lost out to regime-connected operators were big funders of the insurgency. Still, much of the in-country business class saw no alternative to the regime and initially hoped it would end the disorder. In summary, what seems apparent is that there were enough grievances to fuel an uprising in Syria but only among a plurality of the population, with a significant minority adhering to the regime as a better alternative than civil war, and the majority on the sidelines. This helps explain the regime's ability to sustain its cohesion and retain control of the main cities, Damascus and Aleppo (until part of the latter fell to jihadist incursions).<sup>12</sup>

A main difference from all other Uprising cases and what the opposition had hoped to provoke, a major split in the regime or army, did not happen on a major scale. An Egyptian or Tunisian scenario would have required soft-liners in the regime and the opposition to marginalize the hardliners on both sides and reach a deal on leadership change, but in Syria once violence escalated, the opposition was radicalized and soft-liners in the regime were marginalized. There were resignations from the Ba'ath party, particularly in the Dera, as a reaction to the repression there, but senior soft liners like Vice President Farouk al-Shara, were too far from the levers of repressive power to make a difference. The military, organized around its Alawi core and closely linked to the presidential clan, remained largely cohesive and loyal. This contrasts sharply with the early refusal of the military in Tunisia and Egypt to defend the President against protestors. Alawi dominated units, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> division, headed by Maher al-Asad, and the Republican Guard, seen as the most loyal, were most involved in repression. Alawis were also mobilized in thuggish militias (the *shabiha*) and recruited into the military reserves; with much to lose if the regime fell, they remained its most reliable shock troops. Moreover, as the Syrian army generally became implicated in the repression—with protestors starting to denounce it—its stake in regime survival increased. While there were increased defections, this was on a lesser scale than the splits or collapse of the army in Libya and Yemen. Eventually, perhaps 10,000 defectors from a 200,000 man army formed the core of armed resistance to

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12 Hassan Abbas, 'The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria,' *Arab Reform Brief*, 51, October, 2011, p 9.

the government, the Free Syrian Army, while many of the protestors joined armed Islamist groups which could soon deploy tens of thousands of fighters. Their capacity to deny the regime control in many areas and the army's lack of sufficient reliable manpower to repress what became widespread armed insurgency, led the regime to withdraw into its strategic southern and western heartlands; this left much of rural northern and eastern Syria out of government control, a scenario somewhat similar to Libya but different from Egypt where the army retained territorial control (except in the Sinai). As the conflict morphed into semi-sectarian civil war, whole communities became entrapped in the "security dilemma," seeing the "other" as enemies. Mass flows of refugees emptied the country of many those caught in between and also of many of the secular middle class peaceful protestors, leaving the field to the radical Islamists.

### ***The External Factor***

Finally, given the relative balance between regime and opposition, the external factor took on increased importance over time. Qatar used Al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising from the outset, while the Saudis funnelled money and arms to the tribes. In November 2011, Qatar and Saudi Arabia prompted the Arab League into unprecedented moves to isolate Syria, aimed, together with parallel European sanctions, at drying up the regime's access to economic resources and breaking its coalition with the business class. Yet, in contrast to Libya, the Western intervention that opposition activists had been counting on, never materialized; and, not dependent, as the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes were on the West, the regime had far less need to restrain its use of violence against protestors; although the threat of Western intervention did cause it to calibrate its escalation of repression for awhile, as peaceful protest deteriorated into armed civil war, restraints were abandoned on both sides.

An anti-Asad coalition, led by France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, with the US in the background, and with the collaboration of lesser actors such as the Hariri faction in Lebanon and the new Libyan regime, began financing, training, arming and infiltrating insurgents into the country, escalating the militarization of the conflict. The safe haven provided by Turkey to the armed opposition particularly enabled it to "liberate" vast areas bordering Turkey from regime control. Somewhat later, trans-national jihadists flowed into the country, acquiring a dominant position in the east as this area slipped out of government control.

The Asad regime's ability to slip out of this tightening stranglehold depended on its links to Hezbollah in the west and, in the east, to Iran and Iraq. It increasingly relied on Iran, whose Revolutionary Guard assisted it with electronic warfare and which urged Iraq to provide Syria with cheap oil and to stay out of the anti-Asad coalition and later on Hizbollah fighters whose entry into the fray tipped the balance toward the regime in the western areas border-

ing Lebanon. Meanwhile Russia and China, antagonized by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya, protected Asad from a similar scenario. External support for both sides was crucial in generating the protracted stalemate in which the country was divided between regime and opposition-controlled areas and in which neither appeared able to prevail over the other.

## **Conclusion**

By comparison to Egypt, Syria appeared less vulnerable to the Arab Uprising. In Egypt, with neo-liberalism and crony capitalism well advanced, the regime lacking in nationalist legitimacy and the president and his son and heir-apparent equally unpopular, grievances were high while the opportunity structure, by comparison to Syria, was also high. This explains the rapid removal of Mubarak. Syrians obviously shared similar grievances with Egyptians. The regime had, from its creation, built-in vulnerabilities which Hafiz al-Asad had managed, aided by the right conditions—bi-polarity, oil rent—to stay on top of. Bashar al-Asad tried to adapt to the less favourable environment of global neo-liberalism, but the contradictions of Western economic integration and the regime's nationalist legitimacy led to a hasty rentierist tertiary tangent, chiefly beneficial to crony capitalists and largely dependent on Gulf capital (“Dubaiization” rather than the Chinese-like social market model the regime ostensibly wanted). To be sure, neo-liberalism and the resulting impoverishment was less advanced than in Egypt, but the sectarian factor, interacting with perceptions of declining and inequitably accessed social mobility, was a damaging vulnerability not found in North Africa's more homogeneous societies. The opportunity structure for revolt was, of course, less favourable in Syria, given greater regime cohesion and a more fragmented, less autonomous civil society. It was regime mismanagement of protests that sparked the uprising and the internet, introduced as part of authoritarian upgrading did, despite its relatively low penetration, provide enough connectivity to overcome atomization and spread it countrywide. However this was far from enough to produce a quick presidential or “regime” overthrow.

The stalemate and protracted conflict that ensued can, in part, be explained by the Syrian regime's particular authoritarian upgrading tangent. While the cohesion of the regime around the president and his Alawi core was a carry over from the Hafiz era, the unevenness of the Uprising, beginning in the periphery and without the capacity to overcome the regime at the power centre, reflects the concentration of many winners of the regime's post-populist strategy in the main cities. The relocation of the (especially Islamist) opposition from the cities (its heartland in the 1980s rebellion) to the rural periphery in 2011 exactly mirrors the post-populist shift in the regime's base. Similar to the 1980s, the regime retained sufficient cohesion and support to prevent an opposition victory. But unlike in 1980, when the regime's repression of Islamist

violence was relatively legitimate and ultimately effective, in the post 2011 uprising, because of the use of violence against initially unarmed protestors, the military suffered more serious defections. This debilitated the regime's capacity to keep control of the country's territory and legitimated armed resistance, a scenario very different from Egypt. Once the opposition was no longer focused around anti-regime demonstrations and the regime's withering territorial control resulted in a breakdown of order, the security dilemma sharpened Syria's sectarian divisions and societal fragmentation reasserted itself, with armed groups fighting over territory, identity and scarce resources. This, in turning the Syrian space into an arena for the clash of rival global and regional forces in a "New Struggle for Syria," generated stalemate and made both a military and a political solution equally difficult.

It is, finally, worth noting that a certain convergence can be seen in all the post-Uprising states, except possibly Tunisia, toward authoritarian restoration. With the overthrow of the elected President in Egypt, and with failed states in Syria, Libya and to an extent Yemen, divided between equally authoritarian warring rivals, the authoritarian resilience scholarship appears to have regained much of its credibility.

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