

Syrian Crisis as a Reversed Two-Level Game

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Abstract

Linkage politics focuses on the ties between different levels of analysis. Putnam's two-level game model specifically focuses on the impact of domestic constraints over international negotiations. In such negotiations the success of an actor is determined by the agreement that is reached and that the agreement is ratified by both sides, putting it into effect. In order for that to happen actors at different levels of analyses need to have overlapping interests and they must prefer an agreement to no agreement. In this study I look at a similar process. One difference is that in Syria the negotiations take place between domestic opponents and a potential agreement is ratified by their international allies, turning the model upside-down. Using the Syrian crisis as an example I evaluate the positions adopted by the actors involved and the potential of a peaceful resolution in the near future.

Keywords: Two-level games, Ba'th, Syria, Uprising, Opposition.

Tersine Dönmüş İki Seviyeli Bir Oyun Olarak Suriye Krizi

Özet

Bağlantı politikaları farklı analiz seviyeleri arasındaki bağlara odaklanır. Putnam'ın iki seviyeli oyun modeli özellikle iç politikadan doğan kısıtlamaların uluslararası görüşmelere etkisine odaklanır. Bu tür görüşmelerde bir aktörün başarısı ortaya çıkan anlaşma ve bu anlaşmanın iki tarafça onaylanarak yürürlüğe girmesiyle ölçülür. Bunun mümkün olması için farklı seviyelerdeki aktörlerin çıkarlarının örtüşmesi ve bir anlaşma yapmayı anlaşmadan görüşmeleri sonlandırmaya tercih etmeleri gerekir. Bu çalışmada ben de benzer bir sürece bakıyorum. Bir fark modelin ters çevrilmesiyle Suriye'de görüşmelerin iç politikadaki rakipler arasında, onayın ise bu aktörlerin uluslararası müttefiklerinden gelecek olması. Suriye krizi örneğinden hareketle aktörlerin konumlarını ve yakın gelecekte barışçı bir çözüm olasılığını değerlendiriyorum.

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الأزمة السورية كلعبة ذات مستويين انعكست رأساً على عقب

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: خلاصة

تتمحور سياسات الصلات على الروابط الكائنة بين مستويات التحليل المختلفة. ان موديل لعبة بوتنام ذات المستويين يتمحور بشكل رئيسي على تأثير التحددات الناشئة عن السياسة الداخلية على اللقاءات الدولية. ان مدى نجاح احد اللاعبين في مثل هذه اللقاءات يقاس بالاتفاقية التي يتم التوصل اليها وتوقيعها من قبل الاطراف ودخولها حيز التنفيذ. ويقتضي لأجل تحقق ذلك ان تتوافق مصالح اللاعبين من ذوي المستويات المختلفة وتفضيلهم التوصل الى اتفاق على انهاءهم اللقاءات دونما توصل الى هذا الاتفاق.

واننا في هذه الدراسة نقلني نظرة على وتيرة مشابهة. فهناك نموذج مختلف تم قلبه على ظهره. ففي موضوع سوريا تتم الحوارات بين الفرقاء المتنافسة في حلبة السياسة الداخلية، بينما تتم المصادقات من قبل الحلفاء الدوليين لهؤلاء اللاعبين. وانطلاقاً من نموذج الأزمة السورية، فاننا نقوم بتقييم مواقع هؤلاء اللاعبين وامكانية التوصل الى حل سلمي للأزمة في المستقبل القريب.

الكلمات الدالة : نموذج اللعبة ذات المستويين، البعث، سوريا، الانتفاضة، المعارضة.

Introduction

The Syrian Crisis began in March 2011 and gradually escalated to a violent domestic conflict with regional and global consequences. Even though there appears no end in sight, it is necessary to conduct a multi-level analysis to better understand the interests of the large number of actors involved and the connections between them. One way of doing this is to approach the issue from a decision-making point of view where actors face a number of constraints at different levels of analysis.

International relations literature has been focusing on linkages between different levels of analyses, the main focus being the impact of domestic politics on international behavior. As Leeds pointed out one example of this large body is the "second image" literature based on "the argument that characteristics typical of democratic political systems advantage states in making credible commitments in the international arena."¹

1 Brett Ashley Leeds, "Domestic Political Institutions, Credible Commitments, and International Cooperation," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 43, No. 4, 1999, pp. 979.

This view is consistent with Robert Putnam's two-level game model where the international level is where the negotiations between actors take place and domestic politics is the level that ratifies the agreement reached.² While a large number of studies attempting to improve Putnam's model adopted an approach that emphasizes international negotiations and how they are affected by domestic political conditions, here I argue that the domestic conflicts we have been experiencing in smaller countries with international consequences require a reversal of the model - meaning, an approach where negotiations take place domestically and the ratification is made by external actors. Using Syrian case as an example I argue that in the conflict between the regime and the opposition forces, success is heavily dependent on the outside support each side receives. This support, in turn, depends on these actors' interests.

In the following sections I will first briefly explain Putnam's model and how it evolved since 1988. Later, I will turn my attention to Syria and focus on various actors and the ties between them. Based on these I will attempt to predict potential outcomes we may face in the near future.

Two-Level Games

In his 1988 article "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games" Robert Putnam looked at international negotiations where actors are constrained domestically. His main goal was to create a systematic explanation of the relationship between domestic and international politics. Dissatisfied with the small amount of research, limited to conflict behavior, generated by James Rosenau's taxonomy of "linkage politics," Putnam sought to come up with a simple model that would equally emphasize both policy-making dimensions.³ His evaluation of the literature revealed that the existing studies predominantly focused on one of the levels: the work of Karl Deutsch⁴ and Ernst Haas⁵ on the spillover effects between domestic and international developments left out specific policy developments; similarly the

2 Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1988, pp. 427-60.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 430.

4 Karl W. Deutsch, et al., *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

5 Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye⁶ on interdependence and transnationalism, Putnam claimed, left out the domestic dimension of policy-making; Graham Allison's work⁷ on Bureaucratic policy-making model emphasized domestic factors that affect decision-making, but failed to reveal the connection between two levels, along the same lines Peter Katzenstein⁸ and Stephen Krasner's work⁹ claimed that the central authority would have to be concerned about domestic and international politics while determining policy, but their main focus was limited to international political economy.¹⁰

In Putnam's version there were two distinct levels. The national level looked at domestic politics where various groups try to influence the government and the politicians, in return, for the support of these groups in order to come to and stay in power. The second level of the game is the international dimension where each actor tries to reach an agreement that will relieve domestic pressures, while at the same time limiting the negative impact of international developments.¹¹ Because actors have much to lose they need to pay equal attention to both levels and reach a balance between the two.

Putnam divided the process to stages: bargaining between the negotiators leading to a tentative agreement and separate discussions within each group of constituents about whether to ratify the agreement, which finalizes the agreement.¹² The agreement can only be successful if common interests at both levels align. At the international level governments tend to pursue their own interest at the expense of others and a common interest can appear only if they choose to adjust their policies in belief that an agreement would benefit both sides.¹³

6 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1977).

7 Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1971).

8 Peter J. Katzenstein, "International Relations and Domestic Structures: Foreign Economic Policies of Advanced Industrial States," *International Organization* Vol. 30, No. Winter, 1976, pp. 1-45; Peter J. Katzenstein, *Between Power and Plenty: Foreign Economic Policies of Advanced Industrial States*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

9 Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and US Foreign Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Stephen D. Krasner, "United States Commercial and Monetary Policy: Unravelling the Paradox of External Strength and Internal Weakness," in Katzenstein, *Between Power and Plenty*, 1978, pp. 51-87.

10 Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," p. 431.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 434.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 436

13 Keisuke Iida, "When and How Do Domestic Constraints Matter? Two-Level Games with Uncertainty," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 37, No. 3, 1993, pp. 407.

This means that the key for a successful agreement is the perception that an agreement is better than no agreement at all. Domestically, on the other hand, the common interest that brings the government and the constituents together is often called the national interest and it represents the goal for that actor at the beginning of negotiations.¹⁴ Agreements that will not only be acceptable to negotiators at the international level, but also to constituents at the domestic level create the “win-set.”¹⁵ As a result, a large win-set, meaning that a large number of possible outcomes are acceptable to domestic actors, makes the international level agreement more likely, but at the same time it means that the actor with a larger set will have to be more flexible during negotiations.¹⁶ Smaller win-sets, on the other hand, lead to a higher likelihood of negotiations being broken down without an agreement. According to Putnam the size of the win-set is determined by three factors: domestic coalitions and preferences, domestic institutions, and the negotiators’ strategies at the international level.¹⁷ Based on these arguments Putnam concludes that democratic regimes tend to produce smaller win-sets and if an agreement is to be reached they are in a better position to dictate the terms of it.

Following Putnam, many studies focused on linkage politics. For example Keisuke Iida attempted to add domestic level uncertainty that was missing in the original model.¹⁸ In Putnam’s version uncertainty only existed at the international level and the presence or absence of domestic support was known for certain. Jongryn Mo, on the other hand, attempted to calculate the level of constraints placed on the negotiators’ strategy by domestic coalitions by incorporating a domestic bargaining stage where each domestic participant has three powers: “(1) preference based power, the ability to wait for a better offer; (2) agenda-setting power, the authority to make a proposal; (3) veto power, the authority to veto a proposal.”¹⁹ Mo concluded that the negotiator may be better or worse off under heavy domestic constraints

14 Ibid., pp. 407.

15 Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1988, pp. 438.

16 Ibid., pp. 440.

17 Ibid., pp. 441.

18 Keisuke Iida, “When and How Do Domestic Constraints Matter? Two-Level Games with Uncertainty,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 37, No. 3, 1993, pp. 403-426.

19 Jongryn Mo, “The Logic of Two-Level Games with Endogenous Domestic Coalitions,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 1994, pp. 405-6

depending on the distribution of the domestic power.²⁰ This conclusion, in a way, reaffirmed the importance of regime type. Tarar focused on the impact of domestic constraints on the executive, claiming “that an executive with a national constituency such as a nationally elected president benefits by being constrained, up to the point where the constraint becomes so high that no agreement is possible. An executive is also better off when the constraint comes from his or her own constituency.”²¹ In all these studies the focus has been on the ratification process that was in Putnam’s model secondary and less detailed. David Carment and Patrick James who were primarily interested in a specific type of domestic conflict and the impact it had on that country’s international relations, claimed that ethnic conflicts pose a “security dilemma along two dimensions:”²² The first dimension is the states that intervene to an ethnic conflict in order to exploit the opportunities it presents. The second is the state’s efforts to prevent this external involvement. In either case the political leader is forced by other politicians or the masses to deal with the ethnic conflict while negotiating at the international level. An important contribution they made was the emphasis they had on opportunities as a determinant of state behavior.²³

The relatively large body of literature that has been written since 1988 took Putnam’s structure of negotiations at the international level, followed by a domestic ratification process as a given and tried to build on it. The changes in the international system since the 1990s also changed the structure of conflicts. While during the Cold War the main divisions that required negotiations were external to the state, over the past twenty years a majority of conflicts appear to have emerged within a state before gaining an international dimension. These domestic conflicts often have not only regional, but also global consequences and tend to draw a large number of international actors. International involvement can be direct where other countries intervene in a country’s domestic conflict, like we have seen in Libya, or indirect where other countries let domestic actors sort out the problem while provid-

20 Ibid., pp. 415.

21 Ahmer Tarar, “Constituencies and Preferences in International Bargaining,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2005, pp. 405.

22 David Carment, Patrick James, “Two-Level Games and Third Party Intervention: Evidence from Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans and South Asia,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1996, pp. 522.

23 Ibid., pp. 527.

ing support for the side they favor, like we have been witnessing in Syria. The latter option creates a situation similar to the structure of a two-level game in reverse where the negotiations take place between domestic actors, but the agreement reached by them has to be ratified by their international constituents. In such a structure three factors determine the outcome: domestic actors, domestic institutions, and international actors' interests.

In the following section I will evaluate the Syrian crisis from the perspective of a two-level game where the negotiation level is the conflict between the government and opposition. At the ratification level we see two types of actors: regional and systemic, neither of which is independent from one another.

Syrian Case

At the national level the Ba'th regime and Bashar al-Asad are struggling against a large number of opposition groups. Despite its ethnic dimension, due to sectarian differences, it would be simplistic to base the conflict on ethnic differences. Ethnicity is just one of the major factors and as Carment and James pointed out "when a single ethnic group claims control over the decision process on issues concerning other groups, institutional mechanisms for intergroup conflict management may remain underdeveloped."²⁴ We can clearly observe this failure in conflict management in Syria where the regime is almost solely relying on repression to end violence. Despite that political institutions play a role in constraining elite behavior. The power of political institutions naturally depends on the regime type, democracies being more constrained by institutions. In authoritarian systems important institutions are the single party and the security apparatus that brings the elites to power and keeps them there. In Syria we see this small number of institutions that hold the real political power being dominated by a minority. This is consistent with Carment and James' claim that "elites with a monopoly of power in low-constraint situations can be expected to rely on non-institutional devices for the control and management of conflict between groups."²⁵

A second dimension of the conflict was the economic circumstances in Syria. The economic stagnation between 1996 and 2004 created a growth rate of 2.4 percent per year in a country where the popula-

24 Ibid., pp. 530.

25 Ibid., pp. 530-1.

tion growth was 2.7 percent.²⁶ The pressure on the regime due to the country's economic performance somewhat lessened during the invasion of Iraq when Syria was selling Iraqi oil. These low growth numbers began to affect the standard of living. By 2003-2004, 5.1 million Syrians (30.1 percent of the population) were below the poverty line, 2 million of them were unable to meet their daily needs.²⁷ In a country with limited means the regime does not possess the means to change the tide and is dependent on the aid it receives from other countries to meet at least some of the society's needs. Unfortunately for Syria the future does not look any better than today. The unemployment rate being around twenty percent with about 300.000 new workers entering the job market every year, the economy's ability to provide new jobs is further challenged.²⁸ When it became clear that the situation required more resources than Russia could provide Bashar al-Asad felt the need to adopt limited liberalization policies that would facilitate economic cooperation with the US, the EU, and Syria's neighbors. While these policies were effective in creating economic cooperation, especially with Turkey and the EU, they were not accompanied with a political liberalization process which led to disappointment in certain segments of the society.

Given the political and economic situation in the country, and combined with the recent developments in the region protests began in Syria on March 15, 2011 and met with heavy government repression. Over the past year and a half Ba'ath regime periodically announced reforms but none of these materialized. By June 2012 the death toll reached to 10.000-14.000 depending on the source.

Under these circumstances it is hard to talk of formal negotiations and ratification, but we can interpret both sides' conflict behavior as an indirect negotiation process where they attempt to reach their interests by giving up as little as possible. Regardless of how the conflict proceeds there is going to be a round of negotiations and the ongoing conflict will determine the terms of those negotiations, that is why the participants and their performances are extremely important. In order to understand actor positions one needs to first clarify actor structures.

26 Bassam Haddad, "Syria's Curious Dilemma," *Middle east Research and Information Project*, Vol. 236, 2005, pp. 11.

27 Ibid., pp. 11.

28 Ibid., pp. 11.

Domestic – Negotiation Level

There are two main domestic actors in Syria, the regime and regardless of their differences, the opposition. Neither of those are unitary actors, but the regime appears to be more homogenous than the divided opposition. The Ba'th party and the regime based on it has been a major political actor in Syria for a very long time. Ba'th Party was founded in Syria during the late 1930s and early 1940s against French and British control in the region. The Party supported non-sectarian pan-Arabism, social reform, and a version of socialism they called Arab socialism.²⁹ Other than nationalism many aspects of its ideology were not initially appealing to large segments of Syrian society. As Galvani³⁰ points out the idea of Arab unity meant very little for exploited classes, landlords and industrialists were concerned about the vague Arab socialism, middle classes that mainly consisted of Sunnis found the secularist ideology disturbing. As a result, from its early days on Ba'th relied on the support of non-Sunni rural communities such as the Alawites and Druzes. Another reason Ba'th mainly appealed to rural population was the potential of providing status and education for their children through military schools. Like many newly independent and less developed countries Syrian public education system was insufficient at best and failed to provide opportunities for the lower income groups and military schools were an important way of gaining education at low or no cost to parents.

A Ba'th member, Hafez al-Asad's rise to power began when he was stationed in Egypt like many other pro-Ba'th officers that criticized Egypt's dominance in the United Arab Republic. The secret organization they established was called Military Committee and even though it consisted of pro-Ba'th officers it did not have an organic bond to the party.³¹ It was the Military Committee that took part in the military coup of 1963 after which it was accepted by the Ba'th which had lost significant amount of support (down to about 500 members).³² Both sides benefited from this and managed to control the post-coup coalition government during which they had the opportunity to put Ba'th

29 Because Party ideology was based on the common Arab identity their version of socialism did not include a class struggle (Galvani 1974:5).

30 John Galvani, "Syria and the Ba'ath Party," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Vol. 25, 1974, pp. 5.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 6.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 6.

ideology into practice through nationalization of heavy industry and banks in addition to agrarian reform. When finally in 1966 the Military Committee took over with a bloody coup the members of the new regime's elites were not from the traditional sources of political power in the country, but from its main minority groups. A final bloodless coup within the Ba'ath in 1970 brought Hafez al-Assad to power. Since then the single-party state dominated by security institutions remained stable and the Ba'ath regime managed to use shifting elite alliances in order to maintain a support base.

Throughout his rule Hafez al-Assad faced a number of challenges but managed to stay in power. The most important of those was the end of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia withdrew some of its commitments, Syrian regime had to reformulate its policies. Haddad claims that Syria faced a dilemma: "either it acquiesces to the demands of external forces in order to preserve itself or it compromises its domestic position by allowing the diffusion and decentralization of power."³³ The regime first appeared to choose to improve its ties with foreign powers in order to sustain its domestic control. Economic ties to the EU and attempts to have close relations with the US, as was seen in Syria's decision to join the coalition forces during the Gulf War can be seen as evidences to this understanding.

This process gained momentum following Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000. Bashar al-Assad not only managed to hang on to power, but also brought his own team to influential positions in the country and in the process eliminated many of his father's close supporters. The Tenth Regional Conference of Ba'ath Party in 2005 was the end of this process, convincing many that Bashar al-Assad was secure. The Conference attempted to respond to some expectations of reform while at the same time shuffling the ruling elites. Some of the changes adopted at the Conference were the review of the Emergency Law which has been in effect since 1963, reduction of the scope of the security matters, discussions on a new political parties law, redefinition of the relationship between the party and the state.³⁴

33 Bassam Haddad, "Syria's Curious Dilemma," *Middle east Research and Information Project*, Vol. 236, 2005, pp. 4.

34 Ibid.

At the same time the regime decided not to respond to some of the demands claiming that they were not Syrian people's but external interests'. The Conference was followed by changes in the leadership of key security organizations. As Bashar al-Asad's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat was appointed as the head of the military intelligence while his brother Mahir al-Assad is one of the effective heads of the Republican Guard, the coercive mechanisms of the regime came under direct control of Asad's team.³⁵ With this changing of the guard there were two distinct opinions regarding the future of the regime: "on the one hand, its unquestioning loyalty will make for a less erratic policy. On the other hand, the new Command leadership lacks vision and, many say, competence."³⁶

Even though the leadership positions changed hands over the last decade it does not necessarily mean that the regime is weaker. The structures and institutions are still in place and there is a relatively large elite group that continues to benefit from existing arrangements. Under these circumstances it would require a well organized mass opposition movement or foreign intervention to change the status quo in favor of the regime opponents.

Syrian opposition movement that emerged last year as the 'Arab Spring' took over other parts of the region however, is anything but organized. It developed differently than other countries we have observed during the same period. Instead of mass protest movements in the capital, Damascus, grassroots movements initially developed and organized in Idleb and Homs under the name of Coordination Committees.³⁷ During these early days, local sheikhs emerged among opposition leaders especially in rural areas. They emphasized the peaceful nature of the protests, but they became secondary once the violence levels increased and the regime began targeting them as the more visible faces of the opposition.³⁸

35 Ibid., pp. 7.

36 Ibid., pp. 8.

37 Hamza Fakher, Michael Weiss, *Revolution in Danger: A critical Appraisal of the Syrian National Council with Recommendations for Reform*, (A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing, February 2012), pp. 3

38 Working Model of Syrian Opposition (April 2011). Available at: <http://www.offnews.info/downloads/4e3c254685598.pdf>. [Last Accessed 27 April 2012].

Syria's uprising also was not spontaneous in the sense that protesters observed the developments in other countries and organized to an extent. They were, on the other hand, decentralized with no major group or umbrella organization dominating the scene. This was because the wide variety of ideologies and backgrounds of these groups made it very hard for them to come together around a common model for Syria's future. The only goal they seemed to share appeared to be regime change. First, there were former opposition groups that were in the past forced into exile with no presence in the country when the first protests began. Second, were the opponents of the regime within Syria that were forced to go underground, but managed to sustain their movement despite heavy government repression. A third category was the groups that were formed after the protests began. And finally there were regime defectors that changed sides only after the protests reached to a certain level.

One of these groups that received more attention than others was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood because of its past challenge to the regime and the violent repression that had followed. Because of this challenge membership to the Brotherhood was punishable by death since 1980, forcing many of its leaders into exile. Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be more radical and open to violent opposition than the other chapters of the organization. Still being actively anti-Ba'th, their exiled members contributed to the formation of the National Salvation Front in Syria in 2006, but left that coalition in 2009.³⁹

At the other end of the spectrum is another traditional opposition group, the Syrian Communist Party. Although it has significant influence during the late-1950s they fell in disfavor after they opposed the idea of a union with Egypt. They have been in the Syrian Democratic Assembly with other leftist parties since 1979.⁴⁰

There are also political parties formed by the exiled opposition groups in the West. Reform Party of Syria, established in the US following the September 11, 2001 attacks, is one of those. They consider themselves as the third option (to Ba'th and the Muslim Brotherhood) and

39 Joshua Landis (2009). The National Salvation Front Folds. Available at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=2757>. [Last Accessed 27 February 2012].

40 Divide and Rule in Syria: The Schisms of the Syrian Opposition. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2012/01/article55228708>. [Last Accessed 5 May 2012].

support cooperation with Israel.⁴¹ However, despite the support they received from the US, they do not appear to have a firm base in Syria. Another example is the Movement for Justice and Development, established in 2006 in London, with an emphasis on the expansion of freedoms and an end of the state of emergency.⁴²

One major minority group that is not included in the ruling elite is the Kurds. There are a number of Kurdish parties that have been opposing the regime since 1957 under various names. Twelve of these parties are brought together within the National Movement of Kurdish Parties.⁴³ Some of these parties are separatist while others are more reform oriented and they faced regime repression for a large part of the Ba'th regime.

Considering their number and degree of variation such a decentralized opposition is extremely unlikely to mount a serious challenge to a well organized authoritarian regime. As a result as early as May 2011 there have been efforts to bring together as many of these groups as possible. One early attempt was the Antalya gathering (May 31 - June 2, 2011), with the stated goals of creating “a support group to lobby internationally on behalf of the Syrian revolution as well as for the ouster of President Bashar al-Asad and the dismantling his regime.”⁴⁴ Later, Syrian National Council (SNC) was created in İstanbul, Turkey on August 23, 2011. It was supposed to be similar to the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Libya. However, in Libya NTC was founded in Benghazi, on Libyan soil, after the city was liberated. In Syria there was no “liberated region” that the opposition could use as a base to launch their struggle against the regime. This allowed the regime to claim that the opposition movement it was struggling against had its roots outside Syria and was serving the foreign powers’ interests.⁴⁵

Within a week following SNC’s establishment Burhan Ghailoun was appointed as the chairman. Some of the organizations that joined the SNC were the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood Alli-

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Working Model of Syrian Opposition (April 2011). Available at: <http://www.offnews.info/downloads/4e3c254685598.pdf>. [Last Accessed 27 April 2012].

45 Emma Lundgren-Jörum, “Discourses of a Revolution: Framing the Syrian Uprising,” *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2012

ance, the Damascus Spring, the Kurdish Bloc, and the Assyrians organization.⁴⁶ SNC's creation raised the hopes that a single opposition organization would facilitate Western and Arab pressure, more effectively lobbying for an international military intervention to bring the regime down.

At the beginning, SNC's executive branch, the General Assembly consisted of 140 members, 71 of them living outside of Syria. These 71 member's names were announced claiming that the activists inside Syria would not be safe.⁴⁷ There was also a heavy presence of the Muslim Brotherhood members, about one third of the announced members. This disturbed certain groups within the Council creating competition and reducing its effectiveness. Over time the number of members in executive committees increased significantly, allocating certain number of seats for each organization. However, the increasing number of members did not reduce the tensions within the SNC. Some claimed that a power struggle surfaced between the right-wing Muslim Brotherhood and the left-wing Ghailoun group.⁴⁸ The struggle resulted in Ghailoun's resignation as a result of heavy criticism in May 2012.

Another large opposition group that was established in Syria was the National Coordination Committee (NCC).⁴⁹ Unlike others, NCC was tolerated and allowed to continue its existence by the Asad regime.⁵⁰ Its leader, Hasan Abdul Azim,⁵¹ a former Ba'thist, had announced that they were against foreign intervention and that the removal of Assad was not a priority for them.⁵² While they favored dialogue with the regime, they had certain conditions in order for serious dialogue to be-

46 HamzaFakher, Michael Weiss, *Revolution in Danger: A critical Appraisal of the Syrian National Council with Recommendations for Reform*, (A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing, February 2012), pp. 4

47 Fakher and Weiss (2012) claim, based on interviews, that at the time SNC had very little support inside Syria and that most activists had never heard of it.

48 Hamza Fakher, Michael Weiss, *Revolution in Danger: A critical Appraisal of the Syrian National Council with Recommendations for Reform*, (A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing, February 2012), pp. 4

49 NCC recently became National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB).

50 The announcement they made in September 2011 was covered by the state-controlled media outlets (Fakher and Weiss 2012).

51 He was also accused by some activists of organizing the ambush of the former Ambassador of the US (Fakher and Weiss 2012: 10).

52 Hamza Fakher, Michael Weiss, *Revolution in Danger: A critical Appraisal of the Syrian National Council with Recommendations for Reform*, (A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing, February 2012), pp. 10.

gin. These demands included the end of the military solution, release of all political detainees, the formation of an independent investigation committee, punishment of the people who used violence against protestors, an end to the state of emergency and the martial laws, and finally the recognition of the right to peaceful protest.⁵³ It is clear that the NCC is supported by the regime in some way, but the presence of such an organization is encouraging because it shows that the regime may be willing to accept some form of reform in order to end the violence and can be used by the regime to signal intentions it cannot directly announce. If negotiations begin between the opposition and the Asad regime, the NCC could be valuable in setting the stage.

It is not clear how the regime defectors fit in this picture. They were bitterly opposed by some opposition groups because of their activities while they were still a part of the Ba'th party. One such defector is Rifaat al-Assad, younger brother of the former president Hafez al-Assad. He used to be an influential member of the security apparatus and was even accused of playing an important role in Hama between 1978 and 1982.⁵⁴ A second major figure is Abdul-Halim Khaddam, the former vice president. After his relationship with Bashar al-Assad deteriorated in 2005, he went into exile and became one of the founders of the National Salvation Front bringing together a number of opposition groups.⁵⁵

While it can be argued that the de-centralized nature of the opposition is one of the reasons that lead to failure in bringing down the regime or even secure consistent international support, it is also true that it makes it hard for the government to effectively repress it. Government's efforts to target the opposition leaders were only effective to a degree because there are many public faces of the opposition some of which are from outside of Syria.

Ratification Level

There are actually two different levels where the agreement will have to be ratified before it becomes accepted by the international com-

53 Divide and Rule in Syria: The Schisms of the Syrian Opposition. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2012/01/article55228708>. [Last Accessed 5 May 2012].

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

munity. The first of these is the regional level where there is an effort to establish a new balance. Any solution, in combination with guarantees from systemic actors, will have to address the concerns of regional actors. The second is the systemic level where the main actors have the final saying through their advantage in strength and international status. Neither one of these are independent from each other. Developments at one level are likely to have consequences at the other. As a result, alliances at one level are parallel to the ones at the other. The argument is that regardless of domestic developments, any agreement reached at domestic level will have to be ratified, or at least informally accepted, by these actors in order to be a lasting solution.

Regional

Main regional actors involved in the conflict are Iran and a coalition of countries consisting of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states.⁵⁶ While Iran is aligned with Russia and China in support of the regime Saudi Arabia and Gulf states ally themselves with the US, the EU, and Turkey.

Looking from Iran's point of view Syria has long been an important ally. Especially since the Islamic Revolution, Syria and Iran supported each other especially against Iraq. A regime change in Syria potentially means the end of Alawite domination, making it very hard to sustain the current level of relations. At a more practical level it also means that the support Iran sends to Hezbollah will have to go through a different, and more difficult, route. In addition, Iran will also lose its main weapons client. Despite sanctions, according to UN Iran still continues its weapons shipments to Syria.⁵⁷ As Mohammad Naderi, from the Iran's National Security Council, claims Iranians believe that Syria is being attacked by Saudi Arabia and Israel and that once Asad regime falls it will be time to strike Iran.⁵⁸ At the same time they are tying Syrian conflict to the future of Palestinian movement and threatening that a shift in

56 Turkey is not included here because so far Turkish Foreign Policy appears to mimic US' position and its current involvement appears to be limited to providing training and bases for opposition fighters.

57 Louis Charbonneau (2012). Iran-Syria Arms Shipments Violate UN Ban. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/16/iran-syria-arms_n_1521991.html. [Last Accessed 5 June 2012].

58 Iran preparing a soft landing strip for Syria. Available at: <http://www.rt.com/news/iran-syria-islamic-reforms-167/>. [Last Accessed 8 June 2012].

Syria is likely to destabilize the whole region.⁵⁹ However, Iran's need for the Syrian regime should not be exaggerated. Iran can compensate for the loss of Syria if things develop in its favor in Iraq and Bahrain. This is why they are willing to display some degree of flexibility admitting that the reforms are needed, but that they should be carried out by Syria, not by external powers.⁶⁰ They also never publicly gave unconditional support for the Asad regime. So far Iran has been standing by the Syrian regime but this may change depending on certain developments. First, Iran's best alternative to Asad is the Muslim Brotherhood, but they already positioned themselves against Asad and so far resisted Iranian pressures.⁶¹ It may not be rational to cut ties with the existing regime before guaranteeing Iran will be able to influence its successor. Second, even though Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki appears increasingly close to Iran, Iran's hold over Iraq is not certain and Iranians need time to make sure they have Iraq on their side before they allow Asad regime to fall.⁶² More importantly, Iranian support for the Syrian regime is increasingly becoming tied to the talks on their nuclear program. Iran may at one point demand some compensation in the talks before it is willing to pull its support.⁶³

On the side of the opposition the most visible actor is Saudi Arabia. Considering its conservative ideology and pro-regime stance in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia appears to be an unlikely source of support for any opposition movement. However, there are two priorities for Saudi Arabia one is to make sure protests stay as far away as possible from Saudi soil, and the other is to make sure that Iran does not benefit from changes.⁶⁴ When it comes to Syria, Saudis have two principal concerns: "one internal and one external. First, the Saudi regime seeks to contain internal dissent by demonstrating its Sunni credentials against an Alawite (and thus in its eyes heretical) Syrian regime. (...) Second, Saudi Arabia would like to see a pro-Saudi regime

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Amir Taheri (2012). Iran's triple mistakes in Syria, Iraq and Bahrain. Available at: <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=29658>. [Last Accessed 20 May 2012].

63 Gülriş Şen, "İran ve 'Arap Baharı': Bağlam, Söylem ve Siyaset," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 96-118.

64 Madawi Al-Rasheed (). Saudi Arabia and Syria: logic of dictators. Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/madawi-al-rasheed/saudi-arabia-and-syria-logic-of-dictators>. [Last Accessed 5 May 2012].

in Damascus, in order to promote its role in the region. A crucial aim is to counter the inexorable loss of Iraq and Lebanon, where Iranian influence has grown.”⁶⁵ A participant of the Friends of Syrian People meetings, Saudi support for the opposition movements has three dimensions: they openly provide financial support for opposition fighters’ salaries; they are helping equip opposition fighters with weapons; and they are lobbying for an international intervention to end the violence. At least initially, they argue that the creation of a safe zone and no-flight area is needed to protect the civilian population. What is interesting is that both Iran and Saudi Arabia favor a Muslim Brotherhood led government to replace the existing regime. This may mean even after Asad is gone Syria will have some way to reach stability.

Systemic

The US initially favored the idea of reforming with the existing regime instead of replacing it. Early on, they even claimed that the cause of the violence was not Bashar al-Asad himself, but certain groups within his regime. Gradually, when Asad refused to distance himself from members of his own regime, they lost all hope that the regime in any form could be salvaged and turned to the idea of regime change. This approach can be explained by the Muslim Brotherhood being the most likely alternative, but potentially more dangerous to American interests in the region than the existing regime. Today, the US does not believe that the Annan Plan is a viable solution, but they are supporting it for two reasons. First, in order for UN to support an intervention down the road first all available alternatives must be exhausted. Second, and more importantly, as UN Secretary General Moon and NATO Secretary General Rasmussen acknowledged there is no alternative plan that can satisfy both sides’ demands.⁶⁶ At the moment, the US and the EU are focused on publicly and privately convincing Russia to support a transition plan that will end the violence and either bring significant reform or change the regime all together.⁶⁷ Toward Syria they are applying a more direct policy of trying to force the regime out through economic and political sanctions. Even though these efforts are having an impact Syria’s allies are trying hard to lighten the burden.

65 Ibid.

66 Jamie Crawford. U.S. sticking with ‘Plan A’ for Syria. Available at: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/30/u-s-sticking-with-plan-a-for-syria/>. [Last Accessed 3 June 2012].

67 Ibid.

On the regime's side we see Russia and China, who blocked all attempts toward a resolution to intervene or even condemn Syria. Stressing the right to sovereignty, both countries claim that an intervention is out of question and any problems should be addressed through consultations between domestic parties to the conflict.⁶⁸

Their motivation, however, may be different from one another. From Russia's point of view Syria is its last remaining Arab ally in the region. It is also an important market for Russian weapons. There are at least four reasons why Russia cannot let the Syrian regime fall without any compensation. First, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian Federation began to play a more limited global role. During this period the US was the main actor that shaped the international system. Russia under Putin is attempting to display a confident foreign policy that defies the West. Especially after they were left out in Libya and lost an ally, they appear determined not to allow that happen again. Second, is the strategic motivation. Syria is home to Russia's Mediterranean fleet and regime change may mean the loss of the Tartus port which is very important to Russian access to warm waters. Especially considering that the port at Tartus is being upgraded to accommodate larger vessels, as Asad declared the port will eventually be home to some of Moscow's nuclear-armed warships, it is becoming more important for Russia's global ambitions.⁶⁹ Third, Russia is having its own problems with Islamic fundamentalism in the Central Asia and the Caucasus region and an increasing Saudi control in the Middle East is seen as a security risk for Russia's area of influence. Finally, it is the economic motivation. Russia and Syria are trade partners and Syria has traditionally been a major client of Russian weapons. Even though Russia's largest customer is India, the loss of Syria, so soon after losing the Libyan market⁷⁰ to the West would be a major blow to Russia. Over the past year, Russia sold MIG fighter jets, attack helicopters, and air

68 China, Russia on same page regarding Syria, Beijing says. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/05/us-china-russia-syria-idUSBRE8540BI20120605>. [Last Accessed 8 June 2012].

69 Yagil Beinglass and Daniel Brode. Russia's Syrian Power Play. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/opinion/russias-syrian-power-play.html?_r=1. [Last Accessed 14 March 2012].

70 Russia lost an estimated \$4 billion of contracts in Libya (David M. Herszenhorn. For Syria, Reliant on Russia for Weapons and Food, Old Bonds Run Deep. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/world/middleeast/for-russia-and-syria-bonds-are-old-and-deep.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all. [Last Accessed 7 March 2012].)

defense systems.⁷¹ These sales came after Russian weapons sales to Syria had more than doubled between 2007 and 2010, from \$2.1 billion to \$4.7 billion.⁷² This major increase could barely cover the decline in sales to Iran over the same period.⁷³ However weapons sales are only a portion of two countries economic relations. Russian investments in Syria include infrastructure, energy, and tourism projects reaching an amount of \$20 billion, including a natural gas processing plant.

China, on the other hand, has much less at stake. For them the trade with Syria is not at such a level that the Asad's fall can have a critical impact. For Chinese, Syria can be seen as a "test-case." It is through the conflict that they are, in a way, announcing the world that they are not only an economic player in the international system, but that they are also a political force to be reckoned with. At the same time they are emphasizing the sovereignty of independent states to limit intervention to their domestic conflicts with the Uighurs and in Tibet. Syrian conflict also serves as a signal to similar regimes that China will be on their side when they face outside pressure. It is a way of using soft power in order to improve its relations with Third World nations, especially in Asia and Africa.

Prospects

As it must be clear by now it will be very hard to come up with a solution that will satisfy the needs of these actors at two different levels. There are two potential developments as things stand right now. First, each actor may continue to do what they have been doing until now. The *status quo* represents two dangers, one domestic and one regional. Domestically, the regime is at an advantage because it is better organized and equipped to sustain its pressure on the opposition. This, in turn, means that the majority of opposing groups will not be able to continue their efforts, leaving only the most radical members of the opposition who are not only more determined to bring down the regime,

71 David M. Herszenhorn. For Syria, Reliant on Russia for Weapons and Food, Old Bonds Run Deep. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/world/middleeast/for-russia-and-syria-bonds-are-old-and-deep.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all. [Last Accessed 7 March 2012].

72 Ibid.

73 Down from \$2.1 billion to \$300 million (David M. Herszenhorn. For Syria, Reliant on Russia for Weapons and Food, Old Bonds Run Deep. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/world/middleeast/for-russia-and-syria-bonds-are-old-and-deep.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all. [Last Accessed 7 March 2012].)

but also more experienced in terror tactics they will need to continue fighting. That is why the domestic opposition is likely to become more radical, turning to terrorism to make up for the disadvantage they have. Regionally, the continuation of the conflict means the potential that violence will spread to neighboring countries, mainly to Lebanon, which would cause problems to all involved.

Another option is to bring down the regime, or at least weaken its authoritarian structure with significant reforms. As Carment and James point out “sanctions and international condemnation are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the management of conflicts involving politically underdeveloped and ethnically dominant states.”⁷⁴

Looking at the breakdown of authoritarian regimes Dix explains the process with five stages and two conditions:⁷⁵ the regime’s failure to perform especially economically; regime delegitimation in the eyes of the people; a narrowing in the regime’s support base; defection of regime elites; and opposition coalescence. In Syria, out of these five stages we have observed the presence of the first three. While there appears to be limited defection from the regime, especially from the military, it did not reach a level that may pose a real threat yet. Similarly, despite the efforts to unite the opposition, groups seem extremely divided.

The two conditions Dix mentions are the international involvement and “exit guarantees.”⁷⁶ Internationally, he focuses on international support for the opposition and sanctions against the regime. In Syria we have international support for both sides and the sanctions are only effective to a certain degree due to a divided international community. Finally, “exit guarantees” focus on the treatment of the former regime’s top elites. In Syria, as we have previously seen in Libya, adopted sanctions mainly aimed at cornering the leader and top officials and leaving them no room for movement. This leads the regime to become desperate and try to hold on to power at any cost. However, during a conflict with at least certain degree of ethnic dimension the number of people that will need that guarantee becomes so high that it becomes inapplicable.

74 David Carment, Patrick James, “Two-Level Games and Third Party Intervention: Evidence from Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans and South Asia,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1996, pp. 552.

75 Robert H. Dix, “The Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1982, pp. 554-573.

76 Ibid.

At the moment there appears to be only one way of weakening the regime short of direct foreign intervention. It is attempting to reduce the international support the regime enjoys. Iran and Russia are the important actors because China has less at stake and can afford to be more flexible. Iranian support can be reduced by tying their position in this conflict to their nuclear talks and providing them incentives there. For Russia, things are more complicated because they would need the new regime would have to continue Syria's ties to Russia, which may not be acceptable to opposition groups after Russia stood by Asad for this long. One possibility is to adopt extensive reforms along the demands of the National Coordination Committee and groom NCC which is already relatively close to the regime's line to replace it.

Another alternative may become acceptable to some if things worsen. It would require one of Syria's neighbors acting unilaterally, or with the support of regional actors, attempting to remove the regime and there are only two realistic candidates for this: Turkey and Israel. Israel made an effort to stay out of this conflict until now and it is unlikely that this policy will change in near future. This appears to be due to two concerns. First, they appear to perceive Iranian nuclear program as a more important threat. Second, and more importantly, a weakened Asad poses less threat for Israel than other viable alternatives, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, Israeli involvement would create region-wide problems even possibly delegitimizing the opposition. Turkey, on the other hand, adopted a hawkish stance since the beginning of the conflict and it appears that it may be provoked to intervene under the right circumstances, but as things stand, the results would only be slightly less disastrous than an Israeli intervention.

Conclusion

The focus of the Putnam's two-level game was the domestic political constraints placed on international negotiations. In his model the success of an actor was determined not only by what it achieved at the negotiation table, but also by whether or not the agreement was ratified by both sides. In order to reach this goal two things needed to happen. First, the interests of various actors at different levels of analyses needed to overlap. Second, all sides needed to prefer an agree-

ment failed negotiations, increasing the chances of a compromise. In this study, I argued that the conflict processes are actors' efforts to enter the negotiations at an advantage and can be treated as the early stages of negotiations where actors establish their positions. This was similar to how Carment and James treated ethnic conflicts.⁷⁷ Based on that assumption I reversed the model and focused on the constraints placed by international actors on domestic conflict processes. Evaluating the Syrian example I showed three different levels, domestic politics being the negotiation level and regional and systemic levels as where the ratification takes place. In Syria there appears to be wide gap between actor interests and it appears highly unlikely that they can find a common ground as long as they pursue their common interests. At the same time, there appears little incentive to end the conflict through compromise. For domestic actors it could mean repression in the hands of the other side and for international actors the impact of the conflict is too distant for now. As I explained in the previous section the prospects are grim for now. It seems likely that the Syrian conflict will continue until at least one of the domestic actors gain an advantage large enough to force the other side to compromise, or one of the major international actors shifts its position. Since the stakes are much higher for Russia it may be reasonable to assume that the efforts should focus on ending their support for the existing regime. However, this would cause major losses for Russia. A middle ground that may possibly be acceptable to all involved parties may be to put an end to the conflict through a Russian intervention sanctioned and supervised by the UN.

77 David Carment, Patrick James, "Two-Level Games and Third Party Intervention: Evidence from Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans and South Asia," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1996, pp. 521-554.

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