Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?

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When Bashar al-Asad assumed power in Syria in July 2000 there was much optimism about a young president with exposure to western education who, in his inaugural speech, emphasized his determination to modernize Syria. Eleven years later Syria had descended into turmoil. What had gone wrong? According to Volker Perthes,[1] Bashar al-Asad's project was to 'modernize authoritarianism' in Syria. This ambition was certainly congruent with similar projects across the region, transitions documented in the literature as a movement from an originally populist form of authoritarianism to 'post-populist' or neo-liberal versions.[2] Authoritarian power was now used to pursue economic liberalization and privatization, in the process shifting public assets to crony capitalist 'networks of privilege'.[3] The parallel literature on hybrid regimes stressed that limited political liberalization and manipulated elections facilitated authoritarian persistence,[4] and allowed regimes to foster social forces supportive of economic liberalization.[5] 'Authoritarian upgrading' denoted the techniques by which such regimes tapped new resources, diversified their constituencies and reregulated state–society relations.[6] However, what has since become clear from the 2011 Arab uprising is that each short-term gain for a regime from such techniques of rule entailed cumulative long-term costs that have led to the overthrow of presidents in Egypt and Tunisia and the collapse or near-collapse of regimes in Libya and Yemen, with a similar outcome possible in Syria at the time of writing. Bashar al-Asad inherited an authoritarian state with built-in vulnerabilities which he set about 'upgrading': he went relatively far towards restructuring the regime's social base but failed to undertake a corresponding political adaptation.

* I am indebted for some of the ideas in this paper to Samir al-Taqi, Heidi Huuhtanen and Tina Zintl.

1 Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: modernisation and the limits of change*, Adelphi Papers (London: Oxford University Press for International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004).

2 Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, *The Arab state and neo-liberal globalization: the restructuring of the state in the Middle East* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2009); Stephen 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* 36: 2, 2004, pp. 159–79.

5 Bradley Louis Glasser, *Economic development and political reform: the impact of external capital on the Middle East* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001).

6 Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world*, Analysis Paper 13 (Washington DC: Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007).

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State-building in a fragmented society

In the wake of its 1963 coup the Ba'ath Party took power in a state fragmented on identity lines and geographically truncated by the dismemberment of historic Syria by the western powers; this state was an artificial creation having to compete for the loyalty of its citizens with sub- and suprastate identities. While Arabism, in bridging communal cleavages between the Sunni Arab majority and the mosaic of Arab minorities, was the main basis of cohesion, it also entangled the country in the politics of pan-Arabism and the conflict over Palestine and against western imperialism. The country was also divided on sharp class lines between the ruling landed and commercial oligarchy, a rising radical middle class, which came to dominate the army, and an aggrieved peasantry, a conflict that ultimately destabilized political life. The Ba'ath coup brought to power a new elite whose worldview was shaped by their rural backgrounds and involvement in the social and nationalist struggles of the 1950s.[7]

Originating in a conspiracy by a handful of military officers, the Ba'ath regime started as an 'army–party symbiosis',[8] built on a narrow base and facing fierce opposition across the whole spectrum of political society, from Nasserites to Islamists and liberals. Internally, the regime was wracked by power struggles over ideology and personal ambition in which sectarianism played a prominent role in the construction of rival coalitions.[9] Officers from the minority Alawi sect emerged as a dominant clique owing to their disproportionate recruitment into the army and party before 1963 and class and regional divisions among the Sunnis. The regime managed, however, to break out of its isolation through a 'revolution from above' that broke the economic hold of the oligarchy, won the support of peasants with land reform, and created through nationalizations a public sector employing major segments of the middle and working classes.[10] Investment in public health and education gave momentum to literacy and life expectancy increases that continued into the 1990s; indicative of the regime's rural base, rural electrification rose from 2 per cent in 1963 to 95 per cent in 1992. In parallel, the regime sought to legitimize itself by adopting a stance of militant Arab nationalism, which, however, led to its defeat by Israel in the 1967 war and the loss of the Golan Heights, shattering its nationalist legitimacy. This precipitated the rise in 1970 of a realist faction of the regime under Hafiz al-Asad, who reshaped the state for a protracted struggle with Israel over the occupied territories. Asad transformed an unstable regime into a robust one through a 'neo-patrimonial' strategy that concentrated power in a 'presidential monarchy' buttressed by his faction of Alawi lieutenants commanding the heights of the army and security forces; this

[7] Michael van Dusen, 'Downfall of a traditional elite', in Frank Tachau, ed., *Political elites and political development in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman/Wiley, 1975), pp. 115–55; Alasdair Drysdale, 'The Syrian political elite, 1966–1976: a spatial and social analysis', *Middle Eastern Studies* 17: 1, 1981, pp. 3–30; Hanna Batatu, 'Some observations on the social roots of Syria's ruling military group and the causes of its dominance', *Middle East Journal* 35: 3, 1981, pp. 331–44.

[8] Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba'th, 1963–1966: the army–party symbiosis* (New York: Halstead Press, 1972).

[9] Nikolaos van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria: sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in politics, 1961–1980* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

[10] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: revolution from above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

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patrimonial core was linked to society through bureaucratic and party–corporatist institutions that cut across sectarian and urban–rural divides, incorporated a constituency that spanned the middle class and the peasantry, and represented the interests of a sizeable regime coalition.[11] The struggle with Israel, especially in the 1973 war, endowed the regime with a measure of nationalist legitimacy.

This regime, though very durable, had built-in vulnerabilities that had to be constantly addressed. The domination of the political elite by Alawi officers of rural origin provoked resentment among the majority Sunni community and especially the urban merchant–clerical complex represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, which led several urban rebellions, including the insurrection that rocked the northern cities in the early 1980s. The brutal suppression of that revolt was successful because the army, Damascus and the rural constituency of the Ba'ath remained loyal. Especially after this episode, multiple intelligence agencies and praetorian guard units proliferated to protect the regime; these had to be kept loyal through tolerance of their corrupt practices and immunity from the law, practices that became a drain on the public sector and an obstacle to revival of the private sector. The public sector failed as an engine of capital accumulation because it was used to provide populist benefits such as jobs and subsidized food and patronage for the regime constituency. Alienated private capital fled the country or refrained from investment, except in tertiary sectors that yielded quick profits. The conflict with Israel also diverted resources from economic development into an oversized military, kept relations with the West fraught and put off investors. This national security state, overdeveloped relative to its economic base, generated a permanent fiscal deficit that could only be sustained by external 'rent'. However, Hafiz al-Asad was able to use a nationalist foreign policy and Syria's status as a front line state bordering Israel to get aid from the Arab Gulf states and cheap arms from the Soviet Union.

The economic vulnerabilities of the system were exposed by the economic slump of the late 1980s. The crisis 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; by the 1990s, government spending had dropped from half to a quarter of GNP. A consensus emerged in the regime that the only solution to its economic vulnerabilities was the revival of private investment as the main engine of growth; but this consensus did not extend to how far economic liberalization ought to proceed. In parallel with the fall of Syria's Soviet patron and the 1990s peace process, external aid declined and the Ba'ath's nationalist policy 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 reserves, but these were also expected to decline in the 2000s; in the meantime, Syria pursued, under US auspices, the possibility of a peace settlement with Israel that would satisfy nationalist legitimacy yet open the door to foreign aid and investment. The peace process was paralleled by a fall in military spending from about 18 per cent of GNP between 1976 and 1988 to 7 per cent in the 1990s, which

[11] Eyal Zisser, *Decision making in Assad's Syria* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).

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weakened the regime's alliance with the military. At the same time, state import monopolies were turned over to the private sector and 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. However, the regime remained resistant to full economic liberalization, which was obstructed by the institutionalization of a populist ideology distrustful of the private sector in the ruling party, the wealth reaped by regime insiders from control of the state, the regime-dependent business class that benefited from privileged access to state contracts and the political legitimacy derived from the 'social contract' by which the regime provided subsidized food and employment to the middle and lower classes. Thus the regime continued balancing between its old popular constituencies and its newly emerging bourgeois ones.

This was the situation inherited by Bashar al-Asad. Regime survival required that he preserve the fiscal base of the state, and hence reform the economy; but 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 destabilizing the regime. Bashar initially appeared to manage this balancing act with adroitness, but in the end it proved beyond him.

Succession and the struggle for power: presidential empowerment, regime debilitation

At the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, the party and army elite closed ranks and, to prevent a power struggle, ratified the process Hafiz had begun of establishing his son, Bashar, as his successor. Bashar al-Asad's project, on his accession to power, was to open the economy to the world market and adapt the country to the age of globalization through measures such as introduction of the internet. Ba'athist ideology was abandoned; yet, in the absence of a substitute blueprint, reform proceeded by trial and error, and incrementally to avoid destabilization and provoking enemies before Asad had built up his own reformist faction. His first priorities were to foster modernizing cadres and strengthen state institutions through administrative reform.[12] In principle, the regime sought a 'middle' way, expanding the private sector while reforming rather than privatizing the public sector, and maintaining social protection during economic liberalization, as embodied in the slogan of the 'social market' economy adopted in 2005. However, this middle road, designed to retain the regime's old base while adding new support, failed because the regime had no strategy for actually implementing a 'social market' economy. Moreover, the jettisoning of Ba'athist ideology left a vacuum which neo-liberalism and Islamism would compete to fill.

Initially, Asad 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 this established elite, using his powers of office to

[12] David Lesch, *The new lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and modern Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's trial by fire* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

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retire the older generation; inserting his loyalists in the army and security forces; inserting reforming technocrats into government in a tug-of-war with the party leadership over appointments; and waging battles over the enactment of reformist legislation in the party-controlled parliament and over its implementation in the bureaucracy. Inside the party, Asad worked to engineer a turnover in leadership and cadres that culminated at the 2005 10th 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 clientelist networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. At the same time, he became more dependent on the Asad–Makhlouf family clan, with a resulting overconcentration 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. Nor did the fall of the old guard empower the presidency to drive economic reform more effectively, in respect of either planning a coherent strategy or overcoming bureaucratic fragmentation, since the technocrats that he coopted in their places lacked the stature, experience and networks to get things done; the new ministers and senior officials did not wield sufficient authority and were unwilling to accept responsibility for controversial reforms. Indeed, there was actually a deterioration in the quality of the administration as experienced officials were dismissed but public salaries remained insufficient to recruit capable replacements.

Asad, also seeing the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, starved them of funds and attacked their powers of patronage. The party was infiltrated by elements with conflicting orientations, while its decline as a recruitment channel to top office and reductions in benefits for cadres led to a haemorrhage of members, hollowing out the party. Still facing resistance even after the purge of the top old guard, in 2010 Asad dissolved the second-rank branch and sub-branch leaderships, further weakening the apparatus on the eve of the revolt against the regime. 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; moreover, Asad's curbing of their ability to dispense patronage and legal exemptions, such as tolerance of smuggling, reduced their ability to coopt societal notables such as tribal elders; symptomatic of this was the mid-decade outbreak of several localized sectarian/tribal conflicts (between Bedouin and Druze in Suwayda, and between Alawis and Ismailis in Masyaf), which manifested an erosion of regime controls. Where citizens would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access, increasingly they approached tribal, sectarian or religious notables. In parallel, Bashar saw the army as less reliable than it had been under Hafiz, whose authority had been unquestioned; the regime's alliance with it weakened and its morale declined as its funding dropped, its enrichment activities in Lebanon were lost after 2005, and its arms and equipment fell far behind those of Israel. In short, seeking to consolidate power within the regime he inherited, Asad unwittingly weakened its capacity to sustain his power over society.

Addressing the contradictions of nationalism and international economic incorporation: diversifying rent, shifting social base

While Hafiz al-Asad's foreign policy had served both the main requisites of regime survival, nationalist legitimacy and economic rent, his son struggled to reconcile Syria's integration into the world economy with the Arab nationalist identity that locked Syria into conflict with Israel and its western backers. Bashar's economic liberalization project, initially matched by an opening to Western Europe, was quickly jeopardized by the collapse of the peace process with Israel and the parallel souring of Syrian–US relations. To fill the gap left by the consequent dimming of prospects for foreign investment, Syria pursued an opening to Saddam's Iraq, which boosted its earnings from sale of discounted Iraqi oil pumped via the Syrian–Iraqi oil pipeline but which also antagonized the US. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 the regime won nationalist legitimacy by backing the Iraqi resistance against the US occupation, but this had significant economic costs. US-imposed sanctions, aiming to isolate Syria economically, 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. Sensing Syrian vulnerability in Lebanon, the US also engineered the expulsion of Syrian forces from that country, which cost the Damascus regime patronage for its military barons and job opportunities for villagers; relations with the EU, Syria's main trading partner since the end of the Soviet bloc, also became a casualty of the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri which was blamed on Syria.

The increasingly united western front against Syria underlined the political vulnerability of its trade dependence on the West—which would become an Achilles' heel in 2011. The regime tried to diversify its economic relations and evade isolation by the West through a shift eastward, seeking to attract Arab, expatriate and other non-western investment. Paradoxically, the West's attempt to isolate the country, in making it more desperate for resources, accelerated its economic opening: new laws liberalized trade and foreign exchange, reduced tax rates, opened most fields to private investment, allowed capital repatriation and relaxed labour protections. A Ministry of Expatriates was created to encourage the return of migrants and their capital. Private banking and a stock market were established to mobilize savings for investment, notably from expatriates. In the mid-2000s, when the regime appeared most vulnerable and isolated, Syrian foreign trade actually increased significantly, albeit shifted now towards China, Iran, Turkey and the Arab world under new trade agreements. In 2005 Syria was the fourth largest recipient of Arab investment, and foreign direct investment climbed from a paltry $111 million in 2001 to $1.6 billion in 2006,[13] mostly as a result of excess liquidity in the Gulf. Investment inflows drove a boom in trade, housing, banking, construction and tourism, steadily increasing the proportion of

[13] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *World Investment Reports 2004–2006* (New York and Geneva: United Nations Publication, 2004–2006).

GDP generated in the private sector. Fortuitously and fortunately for the regime, revenue from oil exports doubled between 2000 and 2005 owing to high prices and oil trade with Iraq, enabling the regime to build up a reserve of official foreign assets of around US$18 billion, a security buffer that reached 68 per cent of GDP in 2002.[14]

The drive to evade isolation and access resources meant that the ideal of a social market economy was sidelined, and the policy pursued by Bashar's reforming technocrats headed by Abdullah Dardari was hardly distinguishable from neo-liberalism, with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution. Responsibility for investment and employment was transferred to the private sector, which, however, could not fill the gap left by public sector decline. This shift was paralleled by disempowerment of the traditional corporatist organizations of workers and peasants and the cooptation in their place of business groups; a new labour law ended what 'reformers' considered 'overprotection' of workers, even though the labour movement was very weak in the private sector. The public sector was supposed to be reformed rather than privatized, but the one industry minister who sought to do so, Isam al-Zaim, was foiled by entrenched corrupt interests, and instead it was either starved of new investment or privatized by stealth, with parts turned over to private management by crony capitalists who exported their wealth rather than reinvesting in Syrian industry.

The reformists, in practice, focused on making Syria a centre of banking, tourism and cross-regional trade, turning it into a version of Lebanon. Investment was predominantly in tertiary sectors, as Gulf capital has little interest in manufacturing: up to $20 billion was invested in luxury housing and hotels. The absence of rule of law deterred long-term productive investment in industry and agriculture and the return of much of Syria's enormous expatriate capital. Only 13 per cent of investment after 2000 was in manufacturing, while a flood of cheap imports allowed by trade liberalization drove small manufacturers and micro-enterprises out of business; indeed, reduced tariff protections for industry served as an incentive for investment and entrepreneurship to move from industry into trade. The economy grew at a rate of 5 per cent in 2006 and 4 per cent in 2007 and 2008, and while this enriched the crony capitalists around the regime and the treasury managed to extract a share as well, it did not provide nearly enough jobs to compensate for cuts in public employment and little of it 'trickled down' to ordinary people.

The outcome was a rapid restructuring of the social base of the regime. At the heart of the regime coalition were the 'crony capitalists'—the rent-seeking alliances of political brokers (led by Asad's mother's family) and the regime-supportive bourgeoisie. By so fostering its 'own' capitalists, the regime aimed to survive the incremental transition to a partial market economy and since no significant business venture was possible without regime insiders taking a percentage,

[14] Samer Abboud, 'The transition paradigm and the case of Syria', in Samer Abboud and Ferdinand Arslanian, *Syria and the transition paradigm* (St Andrews: Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009).

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regime crony capitalists developed intimate partnerships with wider elements of the bourgeoisie. It was this bourgeoisie, not the Ba'ath Party, that funded Asad's 2007 re-election campaign. More productive Aleppo capital was less strongly connected to the regime, but benefited from the opening to Turkey. Productive medium- and small-scale capital was, however, marginalized and alienated.

At the same time, the regime jettisoned its former popular constituency. The corrupt aspects of the statist system survived and, indeed, economic liberalization removed former limits on corruption, but its welfare dimension contracted. While the managers of the new banks and businesses earned high salaries, taxation became regressive as revenue loss from income tax reductions was compensated for by cuts in the subsidies that kept low-income citizens from falling into extreme poverty. By the mid-2000s the projected exhaustion of Syria's oil reserves was giving new urgency to reform, and a first target was the subsidies on fuel. Subsidies encouraged a haemorrhage of oil to neighbouring states at the expense of the treasury, but reducing them also inflicted hardship across a wide swath of society, from farmers using irrigation pumps to taxi drivers and those who found heating oil priced beyond their means. Investments in health, education and social security mandated under the 'social market' were obstructed by fiscal austerity, and the regime tried to offload its responsibilities for social protection onto private charities. The encouragement given to the establishment of private schools, universities and medical facilities for the new rich, paralleled by a precipitous running down of public services for ordinary citizens, was emblematic of the changing social base of the regime. While public education and employment had hitherto fostered social mobility, their debilitation rigidified society as access to opportunity came to be determined by wealth. The public sector ceased to provide the employment and pensions that Syrians were used to relying on and still valued. The removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs, decline of farm support prices and neglect of the system of agricultural planning and cooperatives, whose underpaid officials demanded bribes for their services, combined with the terrible drought of 2007–2010, led to agricultural decline. Poor neighbourhoods around the cities burgeoned with the influx of drought victims and Iraqi refugees. In parallel, the urban real-estate speculation unleashed by the influx of Gulf capital, together with an end to rent controls—a consession to the bourgeoisie—drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle strata; families who had lived in low-rent properties for decades became homeless while state-owned land was sold cheaply to investors, making it less available for low-cost housing. The resultant housing crisis was depicted as a 'time bomb' waiting to go off—which it did.[15] The conspicuous consumption of the new urban rich was at odds with Syrian traditions and alienated those in the surrounding deprived suburbs.[16] The President was warned that the people perceived the state to be 'abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich'.[17]

[15] Robert Goulden, 'Housing, inequality, and economic change in Syria', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38: 2, 2011, pp. 187–202.

[16] Fayez Sarah, 'The new Syrians', *Al Hayat*, 16 July 2011.

[17] Muthikhirat al-lajna al-istishari lil al-sayyed ar-rais hawla muuaaid al-dhakhili [Memorandum of the Advisory Committee to the President on the internal situation], unpublished, 2009.

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Managing participatory pressures: authoritarian upgrading and its costs

On the death of Hafiz al-Asad, civil society, in the 'Damascus Spring', briefly mobilized to demand an end of the emergency law, a multiparty system and competitive elections, but was soon repressed.[18] The secular liberal and largely loyal opposition, centred in the professional classes, suffered from fragmentation, resource scarcity and relative isolation from mass society, and Bashar al-Asad could readily have coopted much of it to initiate a 'pacted transition' to a more pluralistic and resilient 'hybrid' regime. He did briefly attempt to use it to strengthen his own power against the old guard; however, when more radical opposition elements attacked the heritage of Hafiz and the corruption of political insiders, the outcome was to empower the regime hard-liners and make Bashar more dependent on the organized base of the regime apparatus. He started to insist that democratization had to follow economic modernization rather than precede it—on the model of China, rather than that of the Soviet Union where it had unleashed instability. From this time, the regime developed a double strategy to manage pressure for participation, which, however, inadvertently unleashed new demands without going far enough to satisfy them.

First, foreign policy was used to generate nationalist legitimacy. The regime deflected opposition demands, encouraged by the fall of Saddam Hussein, for inclusion in a national unity government by exploiting the legitimacy generated by its opposition to the US occupation of Iraq, through an alliance struck with Islamists supporting the resistance to the occupation and by depicting itself as a bulwark of order against the chaos and sectarian conflict there. When Syria's humiliating evacuation of Lebanon in 2005 encouraged the internal opposition to join forces with exiles, including the exiled Muslim Brotherhood leadership, to promulgate the 'Damascus Declaration', the regime associated their democracy discourse with the US project of regional hegemony and was able to mobilize religious-tinged patriotism under the slogan 'God protects you, O Syria'.[19] The regime's nationalist legitimacy was then replenished when its Hezbollah ally successfully resisted Israel's 2006 attack on Lebanon and by its stand on the side of Hamas in the 2009 Israel war on Gaza. When Hezbollah's 2008 power play in Beirut demonstrated the futility of trying to isolate Syria and broke the western diplomatic boycott of Damascus, Asad might have invested his nationalist legitimacy in an opening to the opposition, but instead the regime appears to have seen this as an opportunity to move against dissent.[20] Thus the regime lost several opportunities to broaden its base by coopting the secular nationalist opposition.

A second technique of authoritarian upgrading was the fostering of alternative constituencies that could be balanced against each other. The regime coopted a new alliance of reforming technocrats and the business class, a powerful social

[18] Alan George, *Syria: neither bread nor freedom* (London and New York: Zed, 2003).

[19] Paulo G. Pinto, '"Oh Syria, God protects you": Islam as cultural idiom under Bashar al-Asad', *Middle East Critique* 20: 2, 2011, pp. 189–205.

[20] Carsten Wieland, 'Syria: a tale of missed opportunity', OpenDemocracy, 4 Oct. 2011, http://www.opendemocracy.net/carsten-wieland/syria-tale-of-missed-opportunity, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

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force which, dependent as it was on the state for opportunities (contracts, licences) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism, had no interest in a democratization which could empower the masses to block economic liberalization. The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations, such as junior chambers of commerce, and several government-sponsored NGOs were encouraged by the First Lady; in this way the second generation of educated business elements spawned by the regime were incorporated and other 'modern' elements that might otherwise have pressed for democratization were coopted. However, and especially given the incompatibility of the Ba'ath Party with economic reform, Asad could have further strengthened his position by permitting the formation of a new bourgeois party, as other Arab rulers did in parallel to their abandonment of populism.

At the same time, to appease the urban middle class, Asad allowed a certain political decompression, which further reduced the barrier of fear constructed by Hafiz at the time of the 1980s Islamic rebellion. Enhanced freedom of expression in arts enterprises sponsored by regime-connected businessmen coopted potential political activists into production of well-paid entertainment cinema for the Gulf market. Critics of the regime were treated more leniently, even encouraged to voice constructive criticism, albeit within boundaries highlighted by episodic instances of selective repression. This was meant to provide a safety valve for discontent; but it also increased consciousness of abuses without opening any institutionalized channels of redress. Similarly, the introduction of the internet and mobile telephones was seen by Asad, who had been president of the Syrian Computer Society, as an essential tool of economic modernization, which the regime used to mobilize supporters and legitimize itself. But these moves also gave political activists the ability to build networks, overcome atomization and publicize abuses.[21]

The regime simultaneously developed an ambivalent relationship with Syria's Islamist milieu—traditionally the strongest concentration of opposition to the Ba'ath, and the motive power behind a major insurrection in the early 1980s. Hafiz had sought to tame it through an alliance with moderate Sufi Islam, expressed in the appointment of Ahmad Kaftaro as Grand Mufti, which enabled the latter to expand his *naqshbandiyya* Sufi order and his al-Nur institute in Damascus. Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, who preached a moderate Islam and opposed the attacks on the regime during the Islamist insurgency, was given exceptional access to the media and helped to bridge the gap between the regime and the Sunni community. Bashar al-Asad continued the strategy of fostering moderate Islam as a counter to both radical Islamists and the secular opposition, resulting in the spread of Islamic schools and charities, conservative attire and mosque attendance. Islamist intellectuals and businessmen were coopted into parliament, among them notably the leader of a modernist movement, Shaykh Muhammad Habbash, and recogni-

[21] Roshanak Shaery-Eisenlohr, 'From subjects to citizens? Civil society and the internet in Syria', *Middle East Critique* 20: 2, 2011, pp. 127–138; Cécile Boëx, 'The end of the state monopoly over culture: toward the commodification of cultural and artistic production', *Middle East Critique* 20: 2, 2011, pp. 139–155.

tion was given to the Qubaysi movement that preached Islam among upper-class Damascene women. This largely non-political Islam, concentrating on personal piety, rejecting violence, calling for constructive criticism within the system and mobilizing around non-political issues such as opposition to liberal reform of Syrian family law, seemed less threatening to the regime.[22]

While the outlook of the *ulema*, recruited from the *suq* merchant class, was sharply at odds with Ba'athist socialism, it was convergent with the regime's new neo-liberal tangent; most clerics, at least in the cities, professed a bourgeois ethic that rejected state intervention in the economy and saw the acquisition of wealth as a sign of God's favour. The *ulema* were accordingly permitted to manage the Islamic financial institutions allowed by the regime to attract Gulf money.[23] Bashar also made a concerted effort to build alliances with the interlocked business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo: he appointed the Aleppo mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun as the new Grand Mufti of Syria, and Aleppo benefited from his alliance with and economic opening to Turkey, which brought in new investment.

Islamists were not, however, politically incorporated. The regime rebuffed Turkish efforts to negotiate the admission of the Muslim Brotherhood to politics, while hints that al-Buti would found a moderate Islamist party were never realized. Rather, accommodation of Islam was paralleled by regime efforts to control it. The regime appointed the senior *ulema*, such as muftis and imams of the big mosques. It took advantage of the fragmentation of the Islamic public sphere, for example between Damascus and Aleppo, Sufi orders and their Salafi critics, and conservative imams and modernists, further dividing them by repressing some and favouring others; those who sought accommodation with the regime by cultivating patrons inside the security forces or Ministry of Waqfs (religious endowments) were accorded the freedom and resources to spread their networks but risked loss of credibility with the public.[24]

However, as Islamic schools and charities took over some of the state's education and welfare functions, and as *waqfs* and Islamic charities were enriched while the regime's patronage resources declined, the regime sought to regulate Islamic institutions and assume some control over the distribution of *zakat* (charitable donations). Also, alarmed that it had inadvertently encouraged a more Salafist Islamic current, dangerous to a minority-dominated regime whose legitimacy depended on the hegemony of a secular identity, the regime attempted to reintroduce limits on public displays of piety. However, a mobilization of Islamist leaders forced the regime into a partial retraction and, especially after the 2011 revolt started, into making more concessions.

[22] Line Khatib, *Islamic revivalism in Syria: the rise and fall of Ba'athist secularism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

[23] Thomas Pierret, 'Sunni clergy politics in the cities of Ba'athi Syria', in Fred Lawson, ed., *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi, 2009).

[24] Teije Hidde Donker, 'Enduring ambiguity: Sunni community–Syrian regime dynamics', *Mediterranean Politics* 15: 3, 2010, pp. 435–52.

The seeds of turmoil: unbalanced authoritarian upgrading

By the end of 2010 the outcome of Bashar al-Asad's authoritarian upgrading had become apparent. He had used the external threat to generate nationalist legitimacy, enabling him to marginalize the old guard and ward off pressures from democracy activists. This was combined with an economic opening used to mobilize financial capital as a substitute for declining oil rents. He had positioned himself as balancer above a divided society, propagating an image of himself as both a modern reformer and a pious Muslim. Compared to those of other Arab republics, the regime enjoyed a foreign policy congruent with public opinion, a young President still enjoying the benefit of the doubt and seen as preferable to alternatives in the regime, security forces more loyal and effective than elsewhere, a weaker civil society and a more fragmented opposition.

Yet authoritarian upgrading did not immunize Syria from the Arab uprising, as Bashar al-Asad prematurely claimed it would in an interview in January 2011; indeed, it had negative side-effects and costs that fuelled the subsequent crisis. The need to trim a state overdeveloped on the basis of 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. It may be that these changes were inevitable, but some of the choices the regime made exacerbated their costs without fully exploiting their benefits. Political adaptation did not move in parallel with social changes, as the regime rebuffed the demands of the moderate opposition for political reform and failed to foster a bourgeois party while at the same time debilitating the Ba'ath Party's penetration of society. Effective leadership from the President could still have made a difference but Asad, preoccupied with foreign policy and made complacent by his success in countering external threats, neglected the domestic vulnerabilities of his regime. 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.[25] Asad's speech of 30 March 2011 on the beginnings of the protests, in which he deprecated popular grievances, disillusioned the many who wanted him to use the crisis to advance reform. Had Asad reacted with democratic concessions instead of repression, he might have weathered the crisis and even won a relatively free election. However, the brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrators infuriated both local and international opinion and allowed what were localized protests demanding reform to spiral into a major uprising bent on overthrowing the regime.

The social base of the Syrian *intifada* was those excluded from or only precariously incorporated into the regime's new coalition. The middle-class intellectuals who had mounted the Damascus Declaration reactivated their networks, which, having already reached out to Islamists and Kurds, had started to bridge the divisions that had hitherto enabled the regime to stay on top. However, now

[25] International Crisis Group, *Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): The Syrian people's slow motion revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 108 (Brussels and Damascus, 6 July 2011).

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the initiative fell to the periphery, from villages to medium-sized cities, where the uprising was concentrated. The spark of protest, varying in intensity in different areas, reflected the multitude of accumulated grievances. In Dera, formerly a base of the Ba'ath, where it began, 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, which Asad declined to call to account, ignited the tinder. In Banyas, demonstrations started against the ban on the *niqab* in schools; in Latakia, against an Alawi mafia-like grouping, the Shabiha. All had in common an element of reaction to the neglect of areas outside the main urban centres. The uprising then spread to Hama and Deir az-Zur, traditional bastions of Sunni piety resentful of the regime. The most persistent centre of rebellion was religiously mixed Homs, where sectarian conflict added further fuel to the flames.

If the grievances were there, they had previously inspired lethargy, so what had changed? The intimate linkage of the Arab states in a single 'public space' magnified the 'demonstration effect' of the Arab Spring that had started in Tunisia; similar neo-liberal development strategies and authoritarian upgradings across the region had produced similar sources of grievance, from self-aggrandizing ruling families to the impoverishment of the masses and violations of dignity by security forces unconstrained by law, all resonating regionally, amplified by satellite TV. Moreover, the overthrow of presidents elsewhere showed the potential of mass protests; and once it became apparent that the Syrian regime could not quickly suppress them, others were encouraged to join in. A key role was played by disaffected diaspora-based Syrians, many the children of exiles, now able for the first time to use the internet to encourage dissent inside Syria. The main occasion for mobilization became Friday prayers, with resistance committees springing up around mosques—for example, the Omari mosque in Dera, which was an early headquarters of protest—with the imams, natural leaders of their neighbourhoods, sometimes taking the lead. The identity of many of the protesters was Sunni Islamic, and they felt empowered by the rising influence of Sunni movements across the region and by funding from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood in exile. The shock troops of rebellion were young, unemployed, deprived people with little stake in the status quo, widely dispersed and unknown to the government, hence quickly producing new leaders to replace those arrested or killed. While there was initially no unified leadership that could constitute an alternative to the regime, multitudes of 'coordinating committees' formed to pull protests together, congealing into an internal leadership while exiles formed themselves, with western encouragement and following the Libyan model, into a Syrian National Council.

The social base on which the regime relied for its survival comprised the crony capitalists (its strongest supporters), 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

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Aleppo, where the investment boom, the surge in tourism and the new consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising—although their suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt—and here the regime was able to mobilize significant counterdemonstrations. The middle classes of the two main cities originally saw Bashar as a reformer, and while they were disillusioned by his repression of the protesters they preferred a peaceful democratization and feared instability and the loss of their secular modern lifestyle if traditional rural or Salafi insurgents were to take power. The regime sought to promote itself as a protector of order and exploit citizens' fear of civil war, as happened in Iraq with post-invasion 'democratization', pointing also to the chaos unleashed by the revolt in Homs; but its inability to maintain order called its claims into question. The regime also played on fear of foreign interference and raised the Palestine issue by organizing demonstrations on the Golan; but there was no obvious foreign threat, with Israel lying low, although western governments began to take an active hand in organizing and backing the opposition. Much of the business class saw no alternative to the regime and initially hoped it would end the disorder but, as it failed to do so, some began to see its removal as the only way out.[26] Even the rich beneficiaries of the regime could not be expected to actively fight for it. That left the Alawis, who were mobilized in thuggish militias (the Shabiha) and recruited into the military reserves. Many Alawis, settled in Damascus, sent their families back to the mountains, but, with much to lose if the regime fell, they remained its most reliable shock troops.

Taking a variety of positions between regime and opposition were the *ulema*, who overlap with the business community and reflect its views in valuing stability but, being less dependent on the state than on private *zakat*, can switch loyalties and tended to reflect their varying social milieux. In the main urban centres they took a range of positions, from al-Buti, who warned against *fitna* (discord) by unknown external forces, through the many who criticized repression but wanted reform rather than revolution, such as the Mufti, Ahmad Hassoun (whose son was assassinated by regime opponents), and Muhammad Habbash, who tried to mediate between regime and opposition, to Usma al-Rafai, who faced down the security forces but rejected violent resistance. They took advantage of the uprising to win new concessions from the regime, including an Islamic TV station, a new faculty of Islamic studies and the re-legalizing of the formerly-banned *niqab* (full-face veil). On the periphery, the *ulema* were more likely to be anti-regime: in certain Damascus suburbs, elements connected to Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood actively mobilized protesters, while in towns such as Dera the clergy became openly revolutionary.

The regime's initial response to the revolt was to mix massive repression with traditional attempts at appeasement and cooptation: giving pay increases to public employees, ceasing to enforce regulations, granting privileges to tribal, religious or communal notables. Promises of limited political reform remained largely on paper: for example, the regime ended the emergency law but allowed the security

[26] Hassan Abbas, *The dynamics of the uprising in Syria*, Arab Reform Brief 51, Oct. 2011, p. 9.

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forces to continue to use violence with impunity.[27] Concessions to the Kurds over citizenship and identity, together with links to Iraqi Kurdish leaders and Turkey's opposition to Asad, kept the Kurds ambivalent. But the regime refused to concede democratization as a legitimate way out of the crisis or to accept the opposition as a legitimate partner; instead, it continued with its unilateral top-down constitutional changes, which won it little credit.

Although at first the regime did restrain the amount of violence it used against protesters, the uprising empowered hard-liners such as Maher al-Asad and many of the retired security barons, such as Ali Duba, who returned to power. Their belief that any tolerance of dissent would encourage more, and that sufficient repression could defeat it, as it had in the 1980s, was reflected in an increasing over-reaction. Operations against small towns and suburbs were intended to deter the spread of the uprising to the main cities and to prevent a Libya-like scenario where parts of the country fell into opposition hands, providing an opening for foreign intervention. However, killings only inflamed the opposition, as relatives and friends were alienated and funerals became the occasion for further protests. In contrast to the 1980s, the availability of mobile phones with cameras, the internet and satellite TV rapidly made known the use of violence against unarmed protesters, costing the regime its legitimacy and escalating demands for its overthrow.

The opposition's strategy was to emphasize its non-sectarian, secular, democratic character in order not to scare secularists or the West; to mobilize demonstrations on such a broad scale that the army would be exhausted, spread too thin, or split; and to exaggerate or provoke regime violence so as to discredit it and prompt foreign countries to isolate Asad or even intervene in the uprising.[28] It sought also to damage the economy enough to turn the bourgeoisie against the regime. It expected that demonstrations during Ramadan would provide a tipping point against the regime, and at the end of August, in spite of government violence against several small cities such as Jisr esh-Shaghhour, itself provoked by attacks on the security forces, as many as a million demonstrators flooded the streets. In a newly intensified crackdown, tanks were used to pacify medium-sized cities such as Hama, Homs and Deir az-Zur, and security forces concentrated on arrests and targeted assassination of activist leaders; by September, these measures seemed to have sharply reduced the numbers involved in street protests to perhaps 25,000–30,000. However, the uprising became more violent in the country's most restive regions: Rustum near Homs, Harasta near Damascus, Idlib in the north, and Jabal Zawiya in the north-west emerged as strongholds of opposition, and although opposition fighters were not able to hold such areas against army assaults, neither could the regime keep them pacified when its forces withdrew. Contested by armed resistance from military defectors, the regime lost control over some areas, leaving a vacuum filled by a combination of civil society solidarity and criminality.[29]

[27] Peter Harling, 'Syria's race against the clock', http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/04/11/syrias_race_against_the_clock, accessed 5 Jan. 2012.

[28] International Crisis Group, *The Syrian people's slow motion revolution*, p. 3.

[29] International Crisis Group, *Uncharted waters: thinking through Syria's dynamics*, Middle East Briefing No. 31 (Damascus and Brussels, 24 Nov. 2011).

Ten months into the revolt, the split in the regime—particularly in the army—that the opposition had hoped to provoke had not happened. There were resignations from the Ba'ath Party, particularly in Dera, as a reaction to the repression there; but the absence of high-level defections from the government was symptomatic of continued faith in the regime's survival.[30] The military also remained largely cohesive, with the fourth division, headed by Maher al-Asad and the Republican Guard, the most loyal units and most involved in repression. There were, however, increased defections—as many as 10,000 from a 200,000-man army, some hundreds of whom formed the core of armed resistance to the government—but still nothing on the scale of the split in Libya and Yemen. A new development in November was armed ambushes of the security forces and attacks on their bases by military defectors, possible signs of incipient civil war. By this point, some 1,000 officials or members of the security forces had been killed since the uprising began. Moreover, as the army generally became implicated in the repression and protesters started to denounce it, its stake in regime survival increased. Even as opposition against the regime widened, its own narrowed support base also hardened as the regime aggravated sectarianism to rally its Alawi core.

As for the opposition, it was itself split into several overlapping groups. Notable among these were the external exile-run Syrian National Council, bringing together secular intellectuals and the Muslim Brotherhood; internally, the local coordinating committees, grouped in several bodies; the 'loyal opposition' National Coordinating Council of small leftist parties; and, headquartered in Turkey but operating inside Syria, the Free Syrian Army of military defectors. These groups were divided between those inside the country, risking their lives, and exiles hoping to benefit from regime collapse; between the majority that had initially rejected violence or foreign intervention and the increasing numbers who, losing hope that peaceful protest could dislodge a regime prepared to use massive violence, began to call for it.[31] Indeed, the opposition seemed to lack the capacity to replace the regime without external intervention.

The economic costs of the revolt for the regime and the business class were high. Tourism, inward investment and money transfers from expatriates, on which regime beneficiaries and urban businessmen had thrived, dried up. The regime's revenue base suffered from the decline of tax collections and the European ban on purchase of Syrian oil which it proved unable, in the short run, to circumvent, forcing cutbacks in production. The economy suffered a 2 per cent contraction as investment, the value of shares, and shipping through Syrian ports all dropped by around 40 per cent. Formerly booming trade with Turkey, Syria's biggest trading partner, dried up. With the country haemorrhaging cash, most of it flowing to Lebanon, the Central Bank limited withdrawals of foreign currency and spent $2 billion of its supposed $18 billion reserves to defend the currency. When the government banned imports of most foreign manufactured goods to preserve

[30] Aron Lund, *The ghosts of Hama* (Stockholm: Swedish International Liberal Centre, June 2011).

[31] Randa Slim, 'Meet Syria's opposition', *Foreign Policy*, 1 Nov. 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/02/meet_syrias_opposition, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

foreign currency reserves, the protests of its business constituency forced it to reverse the decision. Externally applied banking restrictions made it harder than ever for Syrians to receive or make transactions in hard currency. The government also withdrew assets deposited in Jordanian banks for fear of their being frozen under western pressure. The main cities suffered from electricity cuts, fuel shortages and rising prices.

If at the end of 2010 Syria had managed to escape from its international isolation, by late 2011 not only was it isolated from the West, but the alignments with Turkey and the Gulf that had allowed it to evade the western embargo in 2005 were now in tatters. Indeed, a new 'struggle for Syria' was under way; Syria is the pivotal Arab state, and when it is united, as under Hafiz al-Asad, it becomes a regional player able to punch well above its weight; when it is divided, as now, it becomes an arena for the struggle of external forces, all seeking to shift, through it, the regional balance of power in their favour. Currently at stake is the balance between the pro-western Sunni axis and the Shi'i-leavened 'Resistance Axis', especially after opposition spokesman Burhan Ghalloun said a post-Asad government would break with Iran and Hezbollah. While the uprising is essentially indigenous, external forces increasingly seek to use it to their advantage. Qatar, once an ally, used Al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising from the outset, while the Saudis funnelled money and arms to the tribes and, with the US, smuggled into the country sophisticated mobile phones (reputedly provided by an Emirati prince) that bypassed Syrian networks.[32] In November, Qatar and Saudi Arabia took the initiative in prompting the Arab League into unprecedented moves to isolate Syria, aimed, together with European sanctions, at drying up the regime's access to economic resources and breaking its coalition with the business class. A UN General Assembly vote condemning the repression (122 in favour, 13 against and 41 abstentions, including China and Russia) showed the depth of the regime's international isolation. The main effect of these moves may be psychological: convincing the silent majority that the regime cannot survive and that the best outcome would be its quick replacement. An anti-Asad coalition, led by France, Saudi Arabia 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, has recently begun financing, training, arming and infiltrating insurgents into the country.[33] The Asad regime's only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold lies with its links to Hezbollah in the west and, in the east, Iran and Iraq. It has 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. Meanwhile Russia and China, antagonized

[32] Nick Ottens, 'Saudi Arabia forging a new Sunni state?', 24 Aug. 2011, http://atlanticsentinel.com/2011/08/saudi-arabia-forging-a-new-sunni-state/, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

[33] Tahir Mustafa, 'Saudi king turns pro-reform activist, but only for Syria', http://www.crescent-online.net/component/content/article/3156-saudi-king-turns-pro-reform-activist-but-only-for-Syria.html, accessed 5 Jan. 2012; Kurt Nimmo, 'Evidence of U.S. effort to arm Syrian opposition emerges', 12 Aug. 2011, http://landdestroyer.blogspot.com/2011/08/evidence-of-us-effort-to-arm-syrian.html, accessed 4 Jan. 2012; 'France training rebels to fight Syria', http://truthfrequencynews.com/?p=22375, 26 Nov. 2011, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

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by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya, albeit under increasing western pressure, have so far protected Syria from a similar scenario.

Conclusion

The consolidation of the Syrian Ba'ath regime under Hafiz al-Asad had built-in flaws, notably its sectarian core and the resentment of the moneyed classes, with a consequent dependence on unsustainable rent. Yet Bashar al-Asad's authoritarian upgrading, intended to address these shortcomings, was itself fatally flawed. The most dangerous juncture for an authoritarian regime is when it seeks to 'reform', particularly when the path of reform combines neo-liberalism and crony capitalism. In Syria after 2000 the overconcentration of power and patronage in the ruling clan debilitated the clientelist networks that connected the regime to society. The spread of electronic media allowed political mobilization to take place as the party's incorporative capacity weakened and in the absence of an alternative integration of youth into jobs that would give them a stake in the status quo. Economic liberalization and the change in the regime's social base advanced too far beyond political adaptation: the Ba'ath Party was gravely weakened but no bourgeois party arose to organize supporters of neo-liberalism, nor were any safety-valve political parties for the secular and Islamic oppositions allowed to compete in freer elections. Although a regime so dependent on a minority Alawi core could never fully accept a majoritarian electoral system without surrendering power, especially once its cross-sectarian Ba'ath Party base was debilitated, key elements of authoritarian upgrading deployed elsewhere could have produced a hybrid regime more congruent with the changes in the regime's development strategy and ruling coalition. Given the resistance of the remnants of the regime old guard, this political rigidity was perhaps inevitable, but Asad's strategies exacerbated the risks: the too rapid jettisoning of the regime's rural and peripheral constituency sowed the seeds of rebellion and the violent reaction of the regime to the opposition challenge provided copious irrigation. At the beginning of the rebellion, a 'pacted transition' in which regime soft-liners less associated with repression might have reached out to moderates in the opposition, as in Egypt and Tunisia, might have been possible; even later the 'hurting stalemate', in which neither side seemed capable of defeating the other, might still have enabled a negotiated transition. However, the hard-liners within both regime and opposition were empowered by the rising violence: too much blood was spilled for either to accept the other as a negotiating partner. Moreover, international encouragement, of the opposition by the West and of the regime by Russia and China, deterred both from moves towards compromise, and the obvious third-party mediator, Turkey, abandoned its neutrality in the crisis. The chance was missed and, as both sides started to feel they were waging a life-or-death struggle in which they must kill or be killed, protracted conflict, descending into a Libya-like scenario of civil war, seemed increasingly likely.

Many of the classic ingredients of revolution had been building for some time. Over the long term, demographic growth and enhanced social mobilization combined with the stagnation of political development. In the medium term, a chronic fiscal deficit addressed via neo-liberal policies that increased inequality and sapped legitimacy was a specific Syrian reflection of region-wide conditions behind the Arab *intifada*. Then, the regime's violent response to protests provided the spark leading to the formation of a revolutionary coalition-in-embryo, a substitute counter-regime of sorts, bridging urban intellectual and rural mass elements. What is new compared to previous revolutions is the role of new media technology in overcoming atomization and evading repression, producing a 'multi-headed swarm' that is impossible to decapitate.[34] The one missing necessary internal ingredient, a split in or collapse of the army, did not emerge, however, and would have remained unlikely except for the external pressures on the state's fiscal base. If this is not enough, foreign military intervention, the additional external condition needed, appeared to be getting ever more likely at the year's end, the possibility sustaining the morale of the insurgents.

Should the regime collapse, the relative absence of strong state institutions independent of it could well leave a vacuum that would not be smoothly filled, particularly since it is uncertain whether a viable opposition exists. Aside from their shared belief that the regime is the source of all problems, the interests of well-off external exiles and the deprived foot soldiers of the rebellion hardly seem congruent. Moreover, insofar as the Arab *intifada*, including its Syrian version, was sparked by the regional incarnations of western-promoted neo-liberalism, the tilt of the opposition to the West seems especially problematic, even putting aside the inevitable differences over the Israeli–Palestinian issue. Any new government in Damascus will therefore be confronted with the same policy dilemmas and limited options that faced Asad's, and will struggle to find better or even different answers to Syria's intractable problems.

[34] Andreja Zivkovic and John Hogan, 'Virtual revolution? Information communication technologies, networks and social transformation', in John Foran, David Lane and Andreja Zivkovic, *Revolution in the making of the modern world* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 191–2.

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