STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN SYRIA

Raymond A. Hinnebusch

"ASADSESCU"—the graffiti on Damascus walls reputedly read when the Rumanian regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu, ostensibly similar to Hafiz al-Asad's Syria, succumbed to revolution at the end of 1989. The widespread collapse of authoritarianism has given more credibility to claims that "modernization" broadens the base of pluralism. In eroding primordial isolation and generating a multitude of interests, it creates a mobilized complex society which, beyond a certain threshold, arguably cannot be governed without political liberalization.

A key variable in a stable pluralist transition is a viable civil society, a network of voluntary associations, sufficiently autonomous of state and primordial community, to bridge societal cleavages while buffering society from, yet linking it to, state power. In Syria's case, "traditional" associations, such as guilds, religious brotherhoods, and mosques—which grew directly out of premodern quarters, villages, and families—are legitimate elements of civil society. With modernization, many adapted and survived; they were, moreover, joined by a proliferation of "modern" parties, professional syndicates, unions, and business associations.

Eastern Europe apparently has passed the pluralist threshold, while in Latin America and East Asia authoritarian regimes have retreated before more complex societies. The Middle East is not immune; in Egypt and Jordan regimes have found that the effective governing of a more mobilized citizenry requires pluralist concessions such as a multiparty system and a freer press. The 1992 electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front and subsequent military *coup d'état* in Algeria suggest the alternative is massive repression and instability. In Syria, no copycat uprising followed Ceauşescu's demise, and authoritarian rule appears

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remarkably durable in spite of increasing socioeconomic modernization. Is Syria an actual case of "Middle East exceptionalism"?

The connection between social differentiation and political pluralization in Syria has been diluted by many intervening variables that raise the pluralist threshold; the regime deploys such still viable substitutes for pluralism as clientalism and corporatism. Syria is, however, undergoing a limited liberalization as the regime adapts its rule to a revival of civil society dictated by the exhaustion of statist development. The private sector is being encouraged, Asad is broadening his base beyond the party, government controls over society are being incrementally relaxed, and signs of a revival of civil society can be detected. This will not produce democratization any time soon, but it may permit a more autonomous and developed civil society, creating the base for future political pluralization.

THE HISTORIC IMBALANCE OF STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Historic imbalances obstructed a stable integration of state and civil society in Syria dating from at least the Ottoman period. The Ottoman state was initially a military-fiscal apparatus imposed by conquest on a primordially fragmented society with a thin layer of civil society between them. There were *waqfs,* sufi orders, and guilds in the urban quarters, while in the Qalamun mountains and the Damascus Ghuta, village associations managed waterworks; in time, local *ayan* waxed powerful as a parasitic tax-farming strata between the imperial treasury and the peasants. Civil society was discontinuous, however, and did not effectively bridge the state-society gap. Periodic local revolts and the clientalist connections of communal and tribal leaders to the state deflected arbitrary power, but, until the Young Turk revolution, society never attained power-sharing in the form of a parliament.

Imperial rule discouraged the emergence of an independent merchant bourgeoisie that might have united the cities to demand such representation. In obstructing the emergence of private property in land until the nineteenth century, the state discouraged the consolidation of a landed aristocracy, an advance beyond tribal fragmentation crucial to state-society linkage.[1] In the absence of powerful independent corporate groups—estates of aristocratic classes and free cities, a religious hierarchy separate from the state—state power was chiefly blunted by the practical limits of premodern technology.

Under French rule, the Ottoman superstructure was supplanted by a semi-liberal one lacking indigenous traditions. This state failed to consolidate strong linkages to civil society, which itself did not uniformly advance in the post-Ottoman environment. The French introduced representative institutions, and the nationalist struggle generated indigenous leaders and rudimentary parties with

1. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), p. 372.

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associational links to the urban quarters. Even as new forms of association were developing, however, older ones were being decimated; for example, capitalist penetration destroyed the guilds of Aleppo artisans headed by shaykhs who settled disputes and enforced standards.[2] A landowning upper class was finally consolidated under the French, giving a social base to the state. This class, however, developing largely through encroachment on peasant small holdings, never attained the legitimacy in the peasant community to give the state stable rural roots. The state was the creature of this notable class whose political parties were fragile parliamentary blocs unable to incorporate other classes. Illiteracy and ignorance crippled the masses' "capacity of . . . political combination."[3]

This narrow-based regime could not survive the accumulating consequences of social change cresting in the late 1950s. Capitalist penetration and social mobilization eroded the self-sufficiency and solidarity of segmental groups as communal land tenures gave way to individual ownership, endogamous marriage declined among educated youth, and modern communications broke down geographic isolation. The patriarchal authority and clientalism on which the traditional elites depended began eroding. Modernization also generated new classes and occupation groups. A small agro-industrial bourgeoisie emerged, and its investments generated a working class that formed trade unions. Expansion of education, the bureaucracy, and the army generated a salaried "new middle class"; the new associations and institutions into which its members were recruited fostered loyalties to profession, class, and nation that competed with those to family, sect, and quarter.[4]

Modernization also stimulated traditional civil society. The revival of agriculture was accompanied by new associations, such as the first Syrian cooperative founded in Dayr Atiyya and merchant-village partnerships to introduce irrigation pumps in Dayr al-Zur. The spread of education, far from uniformly displacing traditional values, spawned new traditional associations, such as the religious brotherhood that educated Salamiyya youth formed to defend the Isma'ili faith.[5]

This social differentiation resulted in political pluralization, as parties, press, and interest groups proliferated in the 1950s. Ideological parties, such as the Baath and the Communists, forged political association beyond personal and parochial loyalties and pushed political activism out from the divans of the notables and the army barracks, into the streets, campuses, and even villages. This broadening of the political arena, however, generated class conflict that aborted the consolidation of the liberal state. The failure of dependent capitalism to incorporate the salaried middle class turned it against the liberal model, while capitalist agricul-

2. Jocelyne Cornand, "L'Artisanat du textile à Alep survie au dynamisme?" *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales Institut Français de Damas* 36 (1984), pp. 104–5.

3. Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 91.

4. Philip Khoury, "Syrian Urban Politics in Transition: The Quarters of Damascus during the French Mandate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 4 (1984), p. 527.

5. Norman Lewis, "The Isma'ilis of Syria Today," *Journal of the Royal Central Asia Society* (London) 39 (January 1952).

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ture unleashed landlord-peasant conflict. The *ancien régime* lacked the rural roots to counterbalance urban radicalism and strong institutions to absorb middle class activism. In the late 1950s, nationalist crises and economic stagnation lent credibility to claims that a powerful state able to mobilize the country for development and defense should take precedence over democracy.

THE BAATHIST STATE

The fall of the ancien régime opened the way for the formation of the Baathist authoritarian-populist state. Its leadership, dominated by rural minorities, was determined to break the power of the urban Sunni establishment. Opposition parties and professional associations—political vehicles of upper and middle class rivals—were repressed or controlled. The mobilization of new pro-regime participants by the Baath Party apparatus gave the regime some societal roots.

At the same time, nationalizations destroyed the economic bases of bourgeois power. Land reform eliminated the landlords' role as gatekeepers between state and village and transformed a large part of the landless proletariat into a small-holding peasantry dependent upon the state. Education and increasing state employment broadened the state-employed middle class.

The increased fluidity of the class structure and spawning of state-dependent social forces created the social terrain on which Asad constructed an autonomous "Bonapartist" state "above" classes. He used a combination of kin and sectarian solidarity, Leninist party loyalty, and bureaucratic command to concentrate power in a presidential monarchy, while a praetorian guard commanded by Alawi clansmen shielded him from challenges.

Control of the public sector and of oil rent acquired in the 1970s gave the regime features of a patronage state in which societal sectors competed for largesse through clientalism partly organized along sectarian lines. This enabled the regime to play off a society fragmented along class, regional, and ethnic-sectarian lines. The regime sought legitimacy through the struggle with Israel, in which it portrayed Syria as the vanguard of Arab nationalism, the most widely accepted political identity. The diversion of enormous resources into a huge military apparatus incorporating one-fifth of the labor force gave the state great weight in society.

This state sharply reduced societal autonomy, and destroyed some social forces while creating and coopting others. The state victimized some of the most developed parts of civil society—the *suq*, merchants, and industrialists. In deploying Alawi *asabiyya* in its primitive power accumulation, it stimulated primordial identities and delegitimized itself in the eyes of many Sunnis. Overlapping communal and class cleavages sharply bifurcated regime and opposition, allowing for little compromise or civility between them; opposition took violent forms while the regime was unrestrained by law in its repression.

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The Baath state was better linked to society than its liberal predecessor, but the array of corporatist associations through which societal sectors had to articulate their interests under party tutelage lacked autonomy. Baathists created and led popular organizations (*munazzamat sha'biyya*), which incorporated peasants, youth, and women, and they dominated the leadership of the trade unions. The professional associations (*niqabat mihaniyya*) of doctors, lawyers, and engineers, in which the Baath was lightly represented, retained a certain independence until the Islamist-led rebellion from 1978 to 1982, during which their leaders were replaced by state appointees. The teachers' and agronomists' unions were Baath-dominated, and even associations that escaped Baath control were, by law, approved and regulated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

The state-society relation was not, however, a wholly zero-sum conflict in which the gains of the state meant across-the-board losses by civil society. Baath corporatism had a special populist character. While most corporatist regimes played off competing social forces or favored privileged groups such as businessmen's associations, the Baath, seeking to mobilize a popular base against the old classes it overthrew, organized previously excluded popular sectors and accorded them privileged access to power denied its bourgeois rivals. Baath corporatism was, at least initially, a strategy of inclusion rather than of exclusion or demobilization, which worked to the benefit of both the state and its constituency. Groups that hitherto lacked organization acquired new, if still limited, social weight. Thus, the women's union mobilized some real activism on behalf of equal employment opportunities and child care, although many women activists criticized its timidity in pushing for equality in matters of personal status.[6]

The peasants union exemplifies populist corporatism. Previous regimes had discouraged peasant organizing, but the Baath, facing intense urban opposition, recruited leaders from the small land-owning peasantry and backed their creation of union branches in the villages. By the 1990s, much of Syria's peasantry was organized. The union's autonomy remained limited, however, and there is no record of dissident challenges to its Baathist leadership. Constructed from the top down rather than through struggle from below, the union today lacks the popular muscle to challenge the state.

The union is not, however, a mere paper organization lacking presence in the corridors of power or the village. Its relations with the state are based on certain shared interests. The union articulates peasant interests within the limits defined by party strategy; thus, it refrains from pressing for further land reform, since the state wishes to encourage investment by the agrarian bourgeoisie, and it has deferred to the state's interest in the compulsory marketing of "strategic crops." In return, the union enjoys institutionalized channels of access; its leaders sit on party and state committees that make decisions affecting peasants. The union played a role in energizing the land

6. Bouthaina Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 28–79.

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reform process and promoting a system of cooperatives that, as channels of credit, services, and inputs, relieved peasants of dependency on landlords and merchants and protected them from renewed land concentration.

The union is also a player in bureaucratic politics, pushing with some success for higher prices for state-marketed crops in conflict with agencies representing urban (Ministry of Supply) or industrial (Ministry of Industry) consumers of agricultural goods. The union has organized small peasants to counter the power of larger proprietors, investors, and middlemen. Thus, union pressure helped implement favorable legislation, such as the agrarian relations law, which might otherwise have remained paper decrees. Today the union is seen as a major obstacle by investors seeking a more favorable law. The union's access to decision makers in the long absence of comparable access for landlords and merchants enhanced the weight of peasants against monied interests that would, in the normal course of things, have been more potent.[7]

Although the union facilitated state control of peasants, it also fostered peasant association that, if regime controls were relaxed, could acquire greater autonomy. Even now the peasant sector is not a state-controlled monolith; it actually retains considerable autonomy because alternatives to the state exist. Although participation in cooperatives giving access to credit and inputs imposes constraints such as state marketing of strategic crops, peasants can opt out and many crops remain on the free market. Peasants pursue investment and accumulation strategies through private kin associations, self-help groupings found widely throughout the Levant. Families diversify resources: one brother works on the land, a second in a petty business, and the third in a government or party job. In this manner, peasants utilize both state and private networks as it suits their interests.[8]

More generally, while the Baath at times aspired to totalitarian-like control, it never "atomized" civil society, where family, religious, and neighborhood solidarities retain their integrity. Syria is a close-knit society where networks of talk and rumor, informal groups, and personal connections penetrate the state, cut across political cleavages, and often soften the harshness of the regime. Although Syria's Baathist structures resemble Iraq's, the regime has never deployed the systematic terror to pulverize society in a way comparable to that used by Iraq.

CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER THE BAATH

Resistance and Evasion

Major parts of Syrian civil society, the "haves" and the "traditionals," were threatened by Baathist redistribution and modernization efforts. One reaction was

7. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 197–219.

8. Françoise Metral, "State and Peasants in Syria: A Local View of a Government Irrigation Project," *Peasant Studies* 11, no. 2 (1984).

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overt resistance led by Syria's Islamic movement. The center of this resistance was concentrated where religious institutions and the trading economy came together—the traditional urban quarters and the suq. Political Islam spoke for the more pious segments of society, notably the *ulama* who resented the secular and minority-dominated Baath regime. Since it was not organized in a state-controlled institution comparable to al-Azhar, the ulama retained considerable autonomy of and capacity to resist the regime.

Political Islam also expressed the lingering urban resentment of policies pursued under the radical Baathist leadership that ruled from 1965 to 1970. Land reform and the substitution of state agrarian credit and marketing networks for the old landlord-merchant ones deprived merchants and landlords of influence and wealth in the villages. Nationalization of industries, which in a few cases touched artisan workshops, was seen as an attack on business and property as a whole. The partial takeover of foreign and wholesale trade deprived big merchants of opportunities, while itinerant peddlers who serviced the villages were threatened by government retail networks. Government price fixing and market regulation alienated merchants of all sizes. The regime's attempt to win over small merchants and artisans failed because state trading bodies could not substitute effectively for the merchant bourgeoisie. Asad's 1971 partial liberalization of trade reopened opportunities for merchants, but they still had to deal with inefficient, corrupt, or unsympathetic government officials.

Political Islam's "counterideology" expressed the anti-statist worldview of the suq. Along with Alawi and military rule, it rejected state domination of the economy. Islamic manifestos demanded that the bloated bureaucracy be cut, that the state withdraw from commerce, and that an Islamic economy be instated that would legitimate free enterprise and the "natural incentives" of a fair profit. Islam, interpreted to exclude socialism, was a natural vehicle of protest against a rural-based regime's assault on urban interests.

This Islamic political association rose out of traditional civil society: Anti-regime sermons in the mosques stimulated rebellion, and the religious schools were Ikhwan recruitment pools; the suq was a consistent center of anti-socialist merchant strikes; professional associations frequently mobilized in alliance with the suq. The Islamic movement also developed the wider organization needed to confront the regime, establishing offices, chains of command, representative bodies, and military branches. The scale and durability of the Islamic rebellion of the early 1980s indicated a substantial advance in organizational capabilities.

In its mortal conflict with political Islam, the state ratcheted up its control over society. A purge of mosques, religious associations, and professional syndicates eliminated these as bases of opposition. The surviving modicum of press freedom and party pluralism was deadened. Political Islam lost the battle, but it remains deeply rooted in the suq and in the pervasive religious sensibility nurtured by the ulama. With a partially autonomous economic base and a counterideology, the traditional city remains the milieu most resistant to state

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penetration, an alternative society with many aspects of civility. Insofar, however, as its dominant political expression rejects secularism and fosters communal resentment, the historical compromise that could lead to its incorporation into the political system is obstructed.

Another strategy pursued by threatened elements of civil society was survival and evasion. As early as 1971, Asad, to win the support of bourgeois civil society in the wake of his overthrow of the radical Salah Jadid regime, created the conditions for this strategy. Trade was partially liberalized, a role for the private sector legitimized, and the previous effort to totally control the economy abandoned. Many Syrians acquired independence from the state through family and work in the Persian Gulf, Africa, or elsewhere and from their ability to smuggle surplus capital out of Syria for investment abroad. In the large informal and black market sectors of the economy, state control was blunted by the corruption of officials.

Resulting variations in the regime's ability to control society produced, alongside the more state-penetrated associations such as the peasant union and the chambers of commerce, a more autonomous "alternative" civil society. The vitality of small enterprises illustrates how they can grow in the space left by gaps in state control. In certain rural areas, such as Yabrud, independent family-owned light industries developed from a preexisting artisanal tradition. A tradition of emigration fostered the import of technology and the accumulation of capital, closeness to Lebanon permitted smuggling to overcome raw material constraints, and product lines were selected from those outside of state price controls. Such autonomy was not without limits: the habit of hiding assets from potential nationalization, the fear of competition from state industries, and constantly changing import-export regulations deterred the natural expansion of these industries into larger, fully legitimate firms.[9]

Another case is that of small textile manufacturers and artisans in Aleppo. Those who joined the officially approved Syndicate of Artisans or the Chamber of Industries were entitled to buy inputs from state factories or import agencies, to participate in a social security fund, and to obtain export licenses from the Ministry of Economy. Alternatively, they could participate in the "parallel" free market controlled by large merchants; artisans were dependent upon these merchants for marketing and sometimes paid higher prices for their inputs, but they presumably preferred personal relations with a patron to dependence on state officials. In cases of conflict, they relied on traditional arbiters rather than the state's labor tribunals.[10] Despite the pervasiveness of government control, there was an alternative network wherein participants could forego certain benefits for greater freedom.

9. Anton Escher, "Private Business and Trade in the Region of Yabroud, Syria" (Paper presented at the Twenty-fourth Middle East Studies Association Conference, San Antonio, TX, November 10–13, 1990).

10. Cornand, "L'Artisanat du textile," pp. 111–41.

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TABLE 1
Syrian Labor Force in Trade and Restaurants

	Labor Force in Trade	Total Labor Force	Percent of Labor Force in Trade
1970	139,002	1,524,552	9.1
1984	253,174	2,246,273	11.3
1989	338,061	2,882,619	11.7

Source: Syrian Arab Republic, *Statistical Abstract*, 1976, pp. 151–2; ibid., 1986, pp. 106–7; ibid., 1991, pp. 76–7.

The artisanal and merchant *petite bourgeoisie,* far from declining under the Baath, flourished in the vacuum left by the demise of the *haute bourgeoisie*: it doubled in size during the socialist decade of the 1960s—from 110,900 to 216,090 according to one calculation.[11] The numbers of merchants grew substantially in the more liberal decades from 1971 to 1991. As table 1 shows, the labor force in trade grew about 7 percent per year and, despite the austerity of the 1980s, had by 1989 increased its proportion of the labor force from 9 percent to almost 12 percent. In some respects, the petite bourgeoisie flourished in spite of the regime, but that it sometimes developed symbiotic relations with public sector suppliers and buyers suggests it manipulated the regime to its benefit.

The Widened Bases of Civil Society

Even as the state sought more control, its development drive, in fostering a proliferation of social forces enjoying more diversified resources, was broadening the formerly circumscribed bases of civil society. Increases in educational opportunity, urbanization, and modern occupations socially mobilized society on a major scale. Table 2 indicates the expansion in the differentiated modern sector. As professionals and workers proliferated, so did membership in syndicates, ostensible networks of civil society. These organizations were not autonomous of the government, and the largest growth was in state-dependent professional associations such as agronomists and engineers, while lawyers, often a force for checking state power, lagged. Presumably autonomous artistic, cultural, and charitable associations actually declined from 609 in 1975 to 504 in 1990.[12] On the other hand, the more autonomous housing and transport cooperatives, in which members pool resources, grew.

11. Elizabeth Longuenesse, "The Class Nature of the State in Syria," *MERIP Reports,* May 1979, pp. 4–5.
12. Syrian Arab Republic, *Statistical Abstract*, 1976, p. 784; ibid., 1992, p. 413.

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TABLE 2
Associational Membership, 1974 and 1990

	1974	1990
Trade Unions	184,916	522,990
Housing Cooperatives	79,435	270,972
Lawyers Syndicate	1,661	5,291
Engineers Syndicate	6,573	36,198
Agronomists Syndicate	1,979	12,442

Source: Syrian Arab Republic, *Statistical Abstract*, 1976, pp. 782–96; ibid., 1991, pp. 412–20.

These figures also exclude associations outside of government control, such as those in which government-employed professionals, to enhance their fixed incomes, pool resources to import smuggled goods. Although there is no reliable data on their scale, these informal cooperatives proliferated as, after 1976, inflation radically reduced the purchasing power of professionals on fixed state salaries. Thus, the decline of the state's ability to control the economy and provide resources stimulated the formation of autonomous associations outside its control.

The sheer increase in the numbers of educated professionals has put pressure on the state: To contain the brain drain, to meet expectations for jobs the state can no longer provide in sufficient numbers, and to avoid the political threat of the educated unemployed, the regime is moving incrementally to accommodate their expectations for greater economic and personal freedom. Allowing professional syndicates the greater freedom they enjoy in states such as Egypt could satisfy some pent up participation demands.

Retreat of the State, Bourgeois Resurgence

An independent bourgeoisie is the force most able to carve out room for civil society and potentially to check state power. By the late 1970s, the state, instead of breaking down class barriers, began to reconstruct them. It either generated or became the pole around which a new bourgeoisie began to coalesce. A "new bourgeoisie" took form as the political elite used office to acquire illicit wealth, went into business on the side and formed business, political, and marriage alliances with elements of the private bourgeoisie. At its core was a "military-mercantile complex" of Alawi officers and Damascene merchants.[13] The "em-bourgeoisement" of the power elite differentiated it from its popular base, muted its conflicts with the old upper class, and gave it an interest in markets and the private sector that eroded its statist ideology. The children of the elite were

13. This concept is attributed by Patrick Seale to Sadiq Al-Azm. See Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 456.

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educated in the West and went into business, merging with and adopting the values of the Westernized bourgeoisie.

The emergence of this new "class fraction," together with economic contraction, prepared the way for a resurgence of the private sector. The rent-driven expansion of the state during the 1970s exceeded Syria's economic base. When rent and growth declined in the 1980s, the state began to shed some of its economic responsibilities, and private business had to be given concessions to fill the economic gap. By the 1990s, the regime regarded the private sector, not just as an auxiliary to the public sector, but as a second engine of growth. The private sector's share of foreign trade has widened rapidly, and new private industries have proliferated.

Two segments of the bourgeoisie—domestic entrepreneurs and expatriates—have particular potential to widen civil society. In the vanguard of entrepreneurs who have risen from the local petite bourgeoisie are the Seif brothers, the largest private employers in Syria.[14] They started making mass-produced shirts, expanded into other garments, and have a reputation for being pious Muslims, and hence good employers who value their staff and provide them social benefits. Their apparent combination of private enterprise and a welfare network outside of government control could be an indication of the potential for the bourgeoisie to construct an autonomous civil society embracing wider strata of the population.

The expatriate internationalized wing of the bourgeoisie is cautiously exploring opportunities inside Syria. The regime's increasing desire to attract expatriate capital puts investors in a strong position to demand greater economic and political liberalization in return. Omran al-Adham, a Paris based expatriate, thinking the time was ripe, published an open letter to Asad urging him to "show confidence in the people" and give them "the opportunity to demonstrate their innovative power in every sphere."[15]

An independent bourgeoisie poised to launch capitalist development has not, however, been consolidated. The bourgeoisie is not strong enough to force greater liberalization than the state wants. It presents no common front in favor of the market because much of it is dependent on monopolies in an over-regulated economy and state contracts and protection. Nor can businessmen yet promote themselves as public figures. Some large merchants who tried to win popularity through press advertisements were broken by the enforcement of currency laws; the regime would tolerate no bourgeois pretensions to political independence.

Businessmen's confidence and investment will remain limited unless they win greater autonomy in which a bourgeois civil society can be constructed. The recent project to create a stock market and the consideration given to demands for

14. Volker Perthes, "The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," *Middle East Report*, May-June 1991, p. 33.

15. *The Middle East*, September 1991, p. 21.

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private or joint venture banks are signs of greater tolerance for such a civil society. Curbs on arbitrary state power also will be needed.

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL-ECONOMIC CHANGE

The regime currently is pursuing a strategy of calculated political decompression, which may widen space for civil society. With the collapse of socialism, the Baath party is ideologically exhausted and no longer a threat to private business. Asad is broadening his base beyond the party to the business class, and a revision of Baathist ideology stresses its long-neglected liberal component that accepted democracy, freedoms, and a private sector. The draconian controls of the 1980s are being relaxed as the Islamic threat recedes, and the security forces are being reined in. There is also greater press freedom, evidenced by the media's ability to criticize ministers. The religious schools and mosques are recovering their autonomy on condition that oppositional activity is eschewed.

At this time, however, full-scale liberalization still holds too many perceived political dangers for the regime. Asad argues that his 1970 rise to power initiated a Syrian *perestroika*—political relaxation and opening to the private sector—long before Mikhail Gorbachev, and that "the phase through which [Syria] is passing is not the most suitable for implementing [competitive elections]."[16] The Baath would have a hard time surviving them, and even a more limited opening could unleash uncontrollable forces.

Until the social cleavage between the state and the bourgeoisie is fully bridged, the Alawis will be threatened by any return of power to the Sunni-dominated business establishment. Fuller political liberalization carries the risk that political Islam would become a vehicle of anti-regime mobilization as long as the ideological gap separating it from the secular, minority regime is so wide. The regime is determined to avoid the recent Algerian and East European scenarios and the security forces have the firepower and personal stake in regime survival to defend it. Limited liberalization, at regime discretion, can be reversed if it unleashes dangerous opposition.

There is so far little overt societal pressure for democratization. The bourgeoisie is too weak; its control of the means of production remains limited and fragmented while Baath corporatism has obstructed most alliances with other classes. Although the political upheavals in Eastern Europe, Algeria, and Jordan have stimulated some yearning for democracy, the accompanying disorder and fears of Islamic extremism made its natural constituents—businessmen and intellectuals—wary of democracy. Much of the bourgeoisie is secular, liberal, and moderate in its Islam, and it is this wing the regime seeks to coopt.

16. Asad speech reproduced in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report*—Near East and South Asia, May 17, 1990, p. 27.

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More valued by the bourgeoisie is stability combined with increased personal and economic freedoms giving scope for greater private association. The bourgeoisie also is now accorded growing access to decision makers; the populist-dominated corporatist system has been opened to them. The prime minister's Committee for the Rationalization of Imports, Exports, and Consumption, in which the heads of the chambers of commerce and of industry are included, gives crucial bourgeois access to economic decision-making.[17] Badr al-Din al-Shallah, head of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, who earned Asad's gratitude for keeping the Damascene bourgeoisie from joining the Islamic uprising, has been particularly influential in redressing business grievances.

Parliamentary elections, although controlled, provide some outlet for the politically ambitious. Some 10 millionaires in parliament are quite outspoken and a block of independent merchants and industrialists sometimes coordinate for common interests. Some religious and even Ikhwan-associated figures have been coopted. Although the state is playing off competing "popular" and "bourgeois" interests, as it becomes increasingly committed to capitalist development, business associations will acquire a growing capacity to argue that this requires new pro-business concessions.

In return for business freedom and security, the bourgeoisie seems prepared to defer demands for political power. This signifies a *modus vivendi* between a state that needs a wealth generating, conservative social force and a bourgeoisie that needs the economic opportunities and political protection provided by the state. Since the inegalitarian consequences of capitalism are likely to heighten popular discontent, neither bourgeoisie nor regime will want full democratization. The new corporatism, combined with a widened role for parliament and rule of law, may foster new habits of accommodation between them and constrain state power, but it deters a pluralist competition of groups and classes. It also puts the regime in a position to play off groups in a divided society.

CONCLUSION

Syria's experience shows that pluralism, no inevitable outcome of modernization, is retarded in the absence of a balance whereby an institutionalized state incorporates an autonomous civil society. The premodern Ottoman state tolerated an autonomous civil society, but it was fragmented and malintegrated into the political structure. The burst of new associations generated by modernization broadened civil society, but political mobilization amidst sharp class cleavages could not be contained by a fragile liberal polity unrooted in an indigenous state tradition. The authority vacuum was filled by the rise of an authoritarian state.

17. Steven Heydemann, "Liberalization from Above and the Limits of Private Sector Autonomy in Syria: The Role of Business Associations" (Paper presented at the Twenty-fourth Middle East Studies Association Conference, San Antonio, TX, November 10–13, 1990).

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The Baath revolution created a more open social structure and a more class-inclusive form of authoritarian-corporatist polity that now embraces a more mobilized peasantry, a large educated middle class, and a reviving private bourgeoisie. This stronger state also deadened the fragile political life of the pluralist era and narrowed the autonomy of civil society. Thus, where an authoritarian-populist state emerging out of class conflict pulverizes classes, where a weak bourgeoisie evokes a large public sector that clientalizes society, and where international conflict fuels a huge national security apparatus, the overdeveloped state dominates and overshadows—but never wholly suffocates—civil society. Moreover, "modernized" semi-primordial association—sectarian asabiyya and clientalism—reinforces authoritarian rule and stimulates a reaction in civil society that retards the modus vivendi with the state needed for liberalization.

Nevertheless, once the Syrian state was exhausted, it acquired an interest in hiving off some responsibilities to civil society. As its functions and control started to contract, liberalizing concessions became unavoidable, and civil society began to revive. The social-economic requisites for pluralism—literacy, modern occupations, a growing private sector—had meanwhile advanced. As yet, the state cannot be forced into more than limited liberalization; patrimonial strategies such as clientalism remain viable since the large public sector and oil rent give the state the ability to stand above, play off, and coopt rival sectors of the fragmented society. Corporatist forms of state-society linkage may be enough to accommodate societal complexity for some time, and the regime holds a large repressive apparatus, knit by asabiyya, in reserve.

The greater autonomy that incremental liberalization accords civil society will, however, revive the bourgeoisie, the force with the resources to construct a business-centered civil society. Having opted to depend on private capitalist investment, the regime will have to be responsive to bourgeois demands for greater rule of law and a general rollback of the boundaries of state power. Increased societal autonomy is likely, in the longer run, to generate stronger social forces that cannot readily be controlled except through wider power-sharing.

The test of civil society in the shorter term may come with the inevitable succession struggle. Until Asad departs, there is little prospect of more than incremental liberalization, but rivals for the succession will need to bid for the support of newly revived societal sectors. The winner may, like Egypt's Anwar al-Sadat, have an interest in building a base beyond the core Alawi-army-party complex, and in stimulating the economic growth needed to consolidate it. This will require concessions of further autonomy to the bourgeoisie and perhaps to the syndicates and unions. The prospects for a peaceful succession without sectarian strife and Lebanonization have been advanced by the Sunni-Alawi alliances and the modus vivendi between the state and the bourgeoisie that incremental liberalization is advancing.

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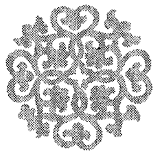
While capitalist development is bound to deepen civil society, and succession may provide the turning point for greater pluralization, democratization depends on political rights and representation for all social forces. Power-sharing for the bourgeoisie must not mean the exclusion of the popular sectors: If corporatism is not to become the instrument for disciplining popular forces on behalf of capitalist development, the associations representing them must attain the autonomy to defend their interests in a post-populist era. Conversely, the most autonomous part of civil society, the Islamic suq, must be integrated into the state without destabilizing it. Only through such a political incorporation of an autonomous and inclusive civil society can democratization advance.



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