Modern Syrian Politics

Raymond Hinnebusch*
University of St. Andrews

Abstract

This article examines major issues and debates in the study of modern Syrian politics including the identity crisis rooted in state formation; reasons for the failure of the early liberal experiment; the nature of the Ba'th regime and whether it can be considered to have carried out a revolution; explanations for the stabilization of the regime under Asad; the nature of Ba'thist political economy; the extent, causes, and consequences of economic liberalization; explanations for succession and the character of Bashar's rule; and the relation between the state and international forces.

Syria is a pivotal and complex state that is the object of much political polemics and a more limited body of scholarly inquiry. This article will survey the major themes and debates in the scholarly literature as regards the Syrian state. This literature has evolved in parallel to that of the Syrian state itself, reflective, in its first generation, of the instability of early independence (1950s–1960s); then of the consolidation of an authoritarian state (1970s–1980s); and, most recently, of the liberalizing adaptation of this regime to growing internal and external pressures (1990s–2000s).

State Formation and the Search for Political Identity

A major issue is the impact of imperialism and state formation on Syria's political identity and historical tangent. Zeine and Tibawi charted how the great powers' dismemberment of historic Syria and the creation of Israel in Palestine became enduring issues in Syrian politics, setting the state on a radical nationalist tangent from the outset.[1] Most analysts saw the truncation of historic Syria as creating an identity crisis with deleterious effects on the stability of the state, an artificial creation that did not, at least initially, enjoy the full loyalty of its citizens. As a result, the state was faced with fragmentation from within and penetration by trans-state forces (notably Pan-Arabism) from without.[2]

One issue of debate is how far Arab nationalism eventually achieved hegemony over rival identities. While Dawn saw it as displacing Ottomanism, albeit only after the collapse of the empire, Gelvin and Tauber stressed challenges to it as early as Faysal's short-lived monarchy by Syrian notables

resentful of the king's Pan-Arab entourage who invoked Islamic or local identities. Muslih argues that even the champions of Arabism ended up accepting the truncated Syrian state.[3] What is certain is that individuals could have multiple identities, which became politically relevant depended on context and that the eventual official hegemony of Arab nationalism was an outcome of political contestation, e.g., between the Ba'th Party, the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), and the Muslim Brotherhood, each of which promoted alternatives. It seems indisputable that the most successful political elites and movements were those that championed the notion of Syria as Arab and part of a wider Arab nation even if, to a degree, they accepted its (possibly temporary) separate statehood. Arguably Arab nationalism was the most successful ideology in filling the post-Ottoman identity vacuum because it best bridged the Syrian 'mosaic', bringing together the Arabic-speaking minorities, most significantly the Alawis and Christians, with the Sunni majority, albeit excluding non-Arabs such as the Kurds.

At the same time, it seems certain that the lack of correspondence between the 'little Syrian' state and the big putative Arab nation retarded identification with the state, created a legitimacy problem for its rulers and embroiled Syria in wider regional conflicts. Malik Mufti charted how early state builders, facing powerful Pan-Arabist sentiment at home and vulnerable to the use of Arabism by stronger states against them, embarked on 'defensive unionism' – such as Syria's adhesion to the union with Egypt – as a way of seeking legitimacy, neutralizing domestic opponents and acquiring external patrons (Iraq, Egypt) against rivals. Kienle similarly showed how in the first decade of Ba'th rule, rival Syrian and Iraq Ba'thist elites attempted to delegitimize each other in propaganda wars depicting themselves as the true champions of Arabism and their rivals as having betrayed it; though each side feared the other, the need to demonstrate Pan-Arab credentials actually led the two Ba'thist regimes into several abortive unity negotiations. Only if Arab identity mattered for regime legitimacy could such defensive unionism and ideological wars, at odds with the international norm of state sovereignty, have made much sense.[4]

Once, under Hafiz al-Asad, the state was consolidated, Mufti argues (and most analysts agree) that Arabism was subordinated to reason of state: balancing against external threats replaced using defensive unionism to manage internal threats. Especially ironic and problematic was the fact that the party, the Ba'th, that won the power struggle over control of the Syrian state in the name of a Pan-Arab project, was the one that eventually consolidated the sovereignty of this state, even as it continued to legitimize itself in terms of a Pan-Arab mission.

A major further issue of scholarly debate is how far a distinctly Syrian identity, differentiated from Arabism, can be said to have emerged after nearly a century of separate Syrian statehood. Some have seen a narrowing of identities over time to the state level, owing to the costs of pursuing Arabism and on-going conflicts with other Arab regimes, though others

have seen this taking the form of a revived Pan-Syrianism – symbolized by the surprising recent alliance of old rivals, the Ba'th and SSNP. Nevertheless, a Syrian identity wholly distinct from Arabism has not emerged, with the content of Syrian identity remaining Arab, and the regime continuing to see its legitimacy as contingent on being seen to represent Arab causes, whether the Palestine issue or opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. Indeed, if Ba'thism gave up the earlier project of merging Syria in a larger Arab state, it continued, under Hafiz, to claim that Syria, as the most Arab of the Arab states, was entitled to speak for the putative higher Arab national interest. Most recently, the relative revival of Syrian civil society under Bashar, combined with the conflicts over Iraq and Lebanon, have spurred a re-opening of the debate over identity among Syrians.[5]

The Failure of the Liberal Regime

The causes of the failure of Syria's early post-independence liberal polity is of more than historical interest: it has bearing, too, on post-authoritarian possibilities for only if the conditions of this original failure have been overcome is a re-newed liberal experiment likely or likely to succeed.

The politics of the post-independence regime was a continuation of the Ottoman politics of notables: Khoury, Winder, and Hourani detailed how, despite elections, a few great families inherited power when the French departed.[6] Arguably, this was a liberal oligarchy, but, in principle, the regime could have been democratized by the inclusion of wider strata within its constitutional system of electoral contestation. In the 1954 election, new middle class parties did break into the political arena, and Seale's *The Struggle for Syria*, masterfully captures the political vitality of this pluralist era while also underlining how it was de-stabilized by the way struggles over regional and international issues were played out in Syria.[7] Additionally, Torrey documented the destabilizing impact of military intervention in politics.[8] Syria's fragile liberal institutions could not ultimately absorb the new social forces generated by modernization and nationalist mobilization, resulting in a duality of power between the parliament, still dominated by landed wealth and a military captured by the salaried middle class. This bifurcation of power led to stalemate, preventing major reforms, but also to such intense conflict that Syrian politicians sought salvation in union with Egypt; although the UAR failed, the dominance of the oligarchy could not thereafter be restored.

Highly contested is how far one can say that liberal capitalism 'failed' in Syria because of the structural weaknesses of peripheral capitalism or whether this resulted from political factors such as instability and the rise of leftist parties. Some writers stress the emergence of an indigenous agrarian and industrial capitalist class that expanded the economy in the fifties and could have driven national capitalist development. As against this, Syrian and other scholars writing in the fifties, pointed to pervasive

landlord–peasant conflict, sparked by the spread of capitalist agriculture that destabilized the system.[9] Moreover, after the early burst of 'easy' agriculture-based industrialization, the economy suffered a downturn in the mid–fifties, with analysts, including the World Bank, at the time arguing that sustained development would require a wholly new order of investment; but profits were being dissipated in consumption or were exported while an unskilled depressed work force and limited market constrained further growth. Many saw a pivotal role for the state and land reform as the solution to spurring investment, human development, and market expansion, but the ruling oligarchy resisted both.[10]

Heydemann[11] shows that the breakdown of capitalist development was not inevitable: while there was a contradiction between the dominance of the economy by the landlord oligarchy and the increasing political mobilization of workers and peasants, several attempts were made at a reformist pathway in which capitalists would have aligned with popular sectors to achieve agrarian reform and allow worker unionization (e.g., under Khalid al-Azm); these alternatives failed owing to the weakness and insufficient differentiation of the capitalists from the landed oligarchy and owing to their fear of populist radicalism.

Just as important as the end to rapid growth in discrediting the laissez faire capitalist model was the widespread belief among the new middle class, fuelled by increasingly hegemonic leftist discourse, that the capitalist model was exhausted and incompatible with both social justice and an independent foreign policy. Indeed, it was the association of Syria's liberal oligarchy with the West at a time of intense nationalist mobilization that explains the ease with which capitalism was de-legitimized by radical movements. The perceived bankruptcy of the capitalist model became a self-fulfilling prophecy since as the upper class lost confidence it could control political events it began to disinvest. The crisis of capitalism was ably charted by Arudki, Zakariya, Petran, Hansen, Hilan, and others.[12] Waldner concluded that when the bourgeoisie aligned with the landlords against reform, conflict moved toward revolutionary levels.[13] The collapse of the liberal/oligarchic republic cannot be understood except from a convergence of a multitude of mutually reinforcing factors.

The Nature of the Ba'th Regime

The Ba'th seizure of power in 1963 was widely viewed as a mere coup in a long line of coups even though the coup-makers spoke of it as a revolution. Indisputable was that the new regime was not a product of mass mobilization from below but of a conspiracy by a handful of military officers; and that it, in consequence, initially had a narrow base and soon faced fierce opposition across the whole spectrum of the politically active population, from Nasserites to Islamists and liberals. Few expected the new regime would last; that it did so signified that this was no ordinary coup.

For in some ways the coup was a delayed outcome of years of earlier political ferment and mobilization. The coup-makers came out of the villages that had experienced the agrarian crisis of the fifties and early sixties and had been politicized by the radical parties. Weuleresse had, two decades previously, masterfully depicted Syria's historic urban-rural gap which continued, more than any other single factor, to shape the conflicts out of which the new regime arouse and which marked its relations with its largely urban opponents.[14] Van Dusen, Drysdale, and Batatu researched the regional and village backgrounds and involvement in the 1950s nationalist struggles that had shaped the worldview of the new political elite.[15] Histories of the Ba'th party, its factions and ideology, by Devlin and Abu Jaber demonstrated that the party was a real political movement with roots in society well before the power seizure.[16] Jabbour showed how the ideological ferment of this earlier period was reflected in policies and institutions after the revolution.[17]

A main early focus of interest was to understand the power struggles and instability of the Ba'th regime in the 1963–70 period. Related issues were whether the outcome was military or sectarian rule and whether party and ideology mattered. Petran, Seymour, Torrey, Allush, and Salamah detailed the factional struggle within the Ba'thist military, partly ideological, partly over personal power.[18] These analyses were fleshed out by the accounts of insiders who had lost out in the power struggles – Safadi, al-Jundi, ar-Razzaz, as-Sayyid – each with a different slant but generally agreeing that their opponents had betrayed the revolution. Some scholars, such as Haddad and Perlmutter, argued that this period was a continuance of the military 'praetorianism' Torrey had earlier charted.[19] Most agreed that, in the absence of strong political institutions, actors used whatever instruments they commanded in the power struggle – sectarian connections, ideological appeal, command of military force. The definitive account of the 1963–66 period, by Rabinovich,[20] had the advantage of working from captured party archival material; his theme of an *army-party symbiosis* was a conceptual advance on the cruder praetorian argument that the officers had captured the party and merely used it to legitimize their power hunger. He showed that ideological debates, votes, and competitive recruitment inside the party were important in swaying the factional power balance even if, ultimately, the ability to command military units most immediately decided outcomes.

The role of sectarianism in this struggle for power was addressed by several authors, notably Van Dam, who agreed that it played an undeniable role since in an uninstitutionalized regime in which conflict generated high mistrust, sectarianism became a tool of solidarity in power struggles before 1970 and in regime consolidation thereafter.[21] How Ba'thist officers from one minority sect, the Alawis, emerged as a seemingly dominant clique, most manifest after 1970 under Hafiz al-Asad, was explained by factors such as their disproportionate recruitment into the army and party

before 1963 and class and regional divisions among the majority Sunni actors. But, importantly, the limits of a sectarian explanation of the long-run trajectory of the regime was emphasized by Batatu, Drysdale, and Perthes, who effectively critiqued exaggerated claims that the regime constituted merely Alawi rule.[22]

But was this a revolution or a mere coup? Located on a continuum between 'great revolutions' and coups are several intermediate phenomenon and most relevant for Syria's case is arguably Trimberger's concept of 'revolution from above',[23] This begins as a 'reform coup' but leads to substantial change in elite composition (middle class and even plebeian elements replace old aristocracies), legitimacy basis (nationalism and modernization), and institutional design as well as resulting in social structural transformation. One test of how far the Ba'th can be seen as imposing a revolution from above would be the extent to which power struggles were driven by and decided by competing ideological visions of the revolution; while writers are divided over how much ideology counted, ideological debates between 'moderates' and 'radicals' were pervasive and ideological conflicts pivotal in key intra-regime showdowns between 1963 and 1970. Nor were these debates detached from watershed policy choices: for example, Rabinovich showed how capital flight in this period discredited the 'moderates' and allowed 'radicals' to use Marxist discourse to legitimize a lurch to the left – nationalizations and the emergence of the state as the main source of capital accumulation and investment.[24] This cleavage over social policy overlapped with a similar division over whether to risk the regime in support of the Palestinian fedayeen challenge to Israel. The radical social and foreign policy tangent of the Ba'th in this period makes little sense if ideology is wholly discounted. That this was a struggle of social forces, not just personalities or small groups, is well documented; thus, Heydemann analyzed the outcome in terms of class struggles and alliances over Syria's developmental path while Waldner saw the Ba'th struggle with the opposition as reflective of the wider conflict between agrarian oligarchies and newly emergent social forces, hence a developmental watershed.[25]

Assessing whether the Ba'th coup become a revolution also required careful research on the extent of social structural change and mass mobilization carried out and on whether new institutions were forged. This was the specific research project of Hinnebusch that culminated in a two-volume work showing the construction of new institutions and state-society linkages between them and Syria's peasantry.[26] Also valuable were Longuenesse analyses of the redistribution of power and property among classes under the Ba'th, a major feature of revolution.[27]

The conclusion is that what began as a coup reflected deeper social conflicts and national crisis that ultimately could not be resolved within liberal institutions. Deepening conflict finally issued in a 'revolution from above'.

Consolidation of Power under Hafiz al-Asad

The remarkable transformation of the Syrian regime after 1970 from an unstable one engaged in ideological infighting to a durable and pragmatic regime able to confront a myriad of challenges, including war, attempted Islamic revolution and economic crisis, became a main concern of analysts beginning in the seventies. Several, including Hinnebusch, Heydemann, and Waldner agreed on the utility of the concept of 'Populist Authoritarianism (PA)' for understanding the regime that took shape.[28] By contrast to the more common 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' in which repression serves the capitalist class against the masses, PA reverses the equation, breaking the dominance of the oligarchy and mobilizing popular sectors through new single-party and corporatist institutions. Analysts focused on different aspects of the PA formula as the Ba'th revolutionary regime was institutionalized under Hafiz al-Asad.

Two major works by Maoz and Seale that appeared almost simultaneously focused on the pivotal role of the personality and strategy of the leader, Hafiz al-Asad. They stressed his ability to combine ruthlessness with compromise and co-optation in dealing with enemies.[29] They also stress the importance of the external power struggle in consolidating Asad's rule, especially the 1973 war and the international stature he achieved in it, as well as the increasing rent made available to the regime in the form of Arab aid to the front-line states, in part a function of the oil revolution resulting from the war.

Others explained the stabilization of the state through the lens of *neo-patrimonialism*, stressing the concentration of power in the regime through the construction of clientele networks around the presidency. Kienle and Batatu detailed the Alawi and tribal composition of the top leader's 'jamaa' (core group) while Sadowski analyzed the use of patronage to co-opt elites, creating a 'loyalty system' under which, within limits, elites were given license to enrich themselves and thereby were 'implicated' in the regime.[30] Picard identified the dark side of the process, the mafia-like clans at the centre whose corruption and smuggling undermined state policy and whose abuse of power put them above the law, especially the group headed by the president's brother, Rifat, until his fall in a 1984 power struggle.[31]

The central role of repression in regime consolidation was widely commented on but the deeper question of how the regime forged a reliable repressive apparatus was explored by Drysdale (1979) who showed how Asad had created two armies, one made up of praetorian guard units recruited from his kin and sect that defended the regime, the other the professional army that defended the country's borders.[32] Asad also created a mukhabarat state in which there were multiple intelligence and security agencies watching the people, the army, and each other.

Others examined the institutional structures created by the regime. Dawisha[33] identified the 'pillars of power' – party, army, bureaucracy, secret

police – on which a dominant presidency rested: according to Hinnebusch,[34] the leader's subordination of and balancing 'above' these institutions was a Bonapartist solution to instability. Zisser[35] conceptualized the regime as a 'dual' power structure, composed of an inner core exercizing dominant but informal power made up of the Alawi security elites, and an outer formal structure of government, which incorporated wider social forces including other minorities, the Sunni peasantry and the Damascene bourgeoisie, with Asad heading and the Ba'th party bridging the two structures and the whole legitimized by Arab nationalism. This structure he concluded, represented the balance of forces in Syrian society and Asad's decisions reflected a certain consensus among his constituency.

Thus, the regime had wider social roots than the cabal at the top. Heydemann[36] explained the 'strong' authoritarianism which he claimed resulted from Ba'thist state-building as a product of the social class struggles out of which the Ba'th emerged and amidst which it carried out its revolution from above; indeed, smashing the oligarchy's monopoly of wealth and the state take over of the heights of the economy, making mass sectors dependent on it for employment and subsidies, was decisive in regime consolidation. Hinnebusch stressed the role of party and corporatist institutions in forging a middle class–peasant, urban–rural, cross-sectarian constituency around the regime. His statistics on party membership depicted a mass party with trivial upper class representation, findings later confirmed by Batatu.[37] Waldner[38] agreed that the Ba'th regime rested on a deal with the peasants who traded support for the right of recruitment into the regime and agricultural support prices and subsidized inputs. The revolution also unleashed rapid social mobility for plebeian strata, especially from the villages and minorities. To be sure, by the late seventies, revolutionary leveling had given way to the construction of new inequalities but the consolidation at the heart of the regime of a new privileged alliance between Alawi power brokers and the Damascene Sunni merchant class – a 'military-mercantilist complex' in Sadiq al-Azm words – was actually a crucial factor in regime stabilization.

Important also was that, over time, Asad constructed a national security state to carry on the struggle with Israel and his seeming success in turning Syria from a victim into a player in regional power struggles legitimized his role. This enabled the regime to promote a hegemonic nationalist discourse charted by Kedar, and a cult of personality analyzed by Wedeen who showed how the regime's ability to extract ritual participation in its practices tended to promote obedience, even among those who did not accept the regime's legitimacy claims.[39]

If the literature of the seventies tended to focus on the new stability seemingly achieved under Asad, that of the eighties analyzed a regime under siege – by attempted Islamic revolution from within, coincident with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and pressures from the West over terrorist incidents. Indeed, in this period many pundits expected the collapse of

the regime. Clearly, the role played by corruption and sectarian favoritism in the consolidation of the regime, combined with Asad's 1976 confrontation with the Palestinians in Lebanon, had provided the conditions for attempted Islamic revolution. Research by Abd Allah, Mayer, and Batatu[40] identified the social bases of the Islamist opposition in the northern cities, financed by the aggrieved old notability of Hama and Aleppo, its foot soldiers recruited from the *suq* and sharia students of those cities. Abd Allah's and Weismann's accounts of its ideology, anti-Alawi, anti-state, even anti-land reform, showed how it reflected the worldview of a private sector and old notability marginalized by a predatory state.[41] Why this attempted Islamic revolution failed was summarized by Hinnebusch:[42] its fragmented and largely unknown leadership and the urban bias of its social base; as against the rural base, nationalist legitimacy, elite cohesion, and repressive capabilities of the regime.

Islamic revolution may have failed, but a less politicized Islamization from below has proceeded since then, tolerated by the regime as part of a tacit deal with chastened or moderate Islamists. This is manifested in increased adoption of Islamic dress, attendance at mosques, and the rise of movements such as the Abu al-Nur institute founded by Grand Mufti Kaftaro and the Qubaysi women's movement that has successfully recruited from the urban upper strata of society. The recent approval of Islamic banking is a further example of regime concessions to Islamic opinion. The invasion of Iraq sparked a more radicalized and politicized Islamic reaction that the regime has tried to both use and control. Within the party there have been debates over how far it should incorporate Islamism into its ideology as a component of national resistance to the West. The regime's coming to terms with Islam has enhanced its legitimacy but for what is sometimes called a 'regime of minorities', any strategy that allows the erosion of secularism carries real dangers.[43]

Political Economy

A major issue was the nature of the new political economy forged under the Ba'th and who were the winners and losers. Marxists routinely characterized it as state capitalism, but the regime's initial hostility to capitalist forces distinguished it from those such as Ataturk's that sought to foster a national–capitalist class. On the other hand, Perthes's definitive, *Political Economy of Syria*, made a strong case that, at least in the late Asad period, the regime had come to serve the interests of a new 'state bourgeoisie'.[44]

Perthes provided the most systematic and subtle analysis of Syria's political economy as it emerged under Asad and particularly during the second period of economic liberalization starting in the mid–1980s. Although liberalization was forced by a crisis of state capitalism, specifically, a foreign exchange crisis, the particular solutions adopted by the regime – austerity, private sector revival, export promotion, but *not* privatization – were a

function of its class base combined with a process of bureaucratic politics in which various interests competed, and importantly, the regime's relative immunity to debt-leveraged neo-liberal pressures from without. The outcome, in which the lower and middle strata suffered income losses while a new rich emerged, roughly reflected the interests of the dominant forces in the regime's coalition – the state bourgeoisie, crony capitalists, the commercial bourgeoisie, and rich peasantry – but always in a way shaped by the regime's autonomy of any one social force, its collective interest in stability and security, and the residual ability of the party bases and trade unions to defend the interests of the public sector and the broader peasant constituency of the regime. Bassam Haddad updated the story to the later nineties, charting signs of a post-populist turn in the emergence of new state-sponsored inequalities resulting from 'networks of privilege' forged between state elites and their private sector partners. The result was continued austerity for the workers and salaried middle class combined with some transfer of monopolies from the public to private sector.[45]

Several micro studies provided insight into the consequences of Ba'thist etatism for the private sector. Cornand and Rabo[46] showed how artisans and merchants evaded regime controls and often thrived in their interstices, relying on smuggling, keeping their businesses small, yet benefiting from state protection of small industries. Indeed, some small-scale textile man-ufacturers found a niche in the global economy to export high quality products. Annika Rabo's study of Aleppo traders showed how businessmen saw regulations as purposively unclear, prolific, and subject to frequent change so that they could be applied arbitrarily by officials, thus generating a need for mediation or bribes; moreover, the earlier dependence on *wasta* (personal mediation) with officials had, in the nineties, given way to pervasiveness of *rashwa* (bribes). As the earlier social mobility that had been enjoyed by sons of shopkeepers through education and state employment reversed in the nineties, people in state employment sought to go into trade.

The rural areas are generally seen as having been the beneficiaries of Ba'thism. Yet, a common theme in many writings, albeit one largely ignoring the complexities uncovered by empirical research, has been the claim that agrarian reforms under the Ba'th benefited mainly the *middle rural stratum*. Empirical research on the actual outcome of agrarian reform was detailed in a series of studies, from Kaylani and Khadar's[47] macro assessments to a series of in-depth local studies conducted by scholars resident at the French Institute in Damascus – Bianquis, Hannoyer, Metral, and Sainsaulieu – as well as an important study of the transformation of a Raqqa village by Syrian scholar Sulayman Khalaf.[48] What these indicated, as supplemented by a wealth of documentation, including the agricultural census, reported by Hinnebusch in his 1989 book and confirmed by Batatu in his 1999 study, was that large numbers of mainstream peasants, but less so the big number of poor peasants below them, had benefited.[49] There had been a major transformation of the countryside through the considerable equalization of

land tenure, land reclamation and irrigation, the spread of education, health care and electrification, agricultural support prices, the raised standard of rural income, and the widened opportunities to rurals available through the Ba'th state. Peasants still had to deal with a sometimes rigid and undynamic bureaucracy, but they were no longer powerless to access benefits and evade regulations. Remarkably, greater rural social equality was combined with a considerably more productive Syrian agriculture as a result of land reform, co-operatives, and rural services; there was also the fact that if landlords wished to maintain their incomes on much reduced post-land reform holdings, they had to become capitalist farmers. The one apparent durable success of the Ba'th revolution was the bridging of the urban-rural gap, although rural poverty remains a fact of life that is being exacerbated by economic liberalization.

Syria in the Lens of Liberalization

The nineties was a period of scholarly pre-occupation with political and economic liberalization in the Arab world. Etatist authoritarianism seemed exhausted and regimes themselves, including Syria's, began to give at least lip service to liberalization. Several writers analyzed the crisis of etatist Ba'thism. Hinnebusch detailed the savings-investment gap and pointed to Syria's inability to move beyond import-substitute industrialization due to the regime's populist strategy which encouraged consumption at the expense of investment, and a leakage of resources through corruption, massive military spending, inefficiencies of the public sector, and, generally, a 'neo-mercantilist' strategy in which the economy was used for state-building purposes. Populism, militarism, and patrimonialism fostered regime autonomy but also over-developed the state relative to its economic base. For Waldner, it was a symptom of 'precocious Keysianism:' the political need to provide good wages and agricultural support prices made investment and exports unprofitable.[50]

Heydemann analyzed limited economic liberalization from the point of view of the regime's political rationality, seeing it as a way of adapting to new conditions.[51] Perthes detailed the resulting processes of limited economic liberalization in terms of a convergence of interests between the state capitalist class and the private bourgeoisie.[52] The regime went through several cycles of liberalization (in the early seventies, again in the eighties, then the early nineties), resulting in a cumulatively greater scope for the private sector in the economy. Yet, what was striking, Perthes argued, was how the regime seemed able, compared to other Arab states, to evade or limit the extent of opening to the world market and to maintain parts of the populist contract. Rent and relative lack of debt to the West buffered the regime from IMF imposed structural adjustment. A text edited by Kienle, assessed the pressures for change and the regime's main adaptation, namely, an effort to make the private sector a partner with the regime.[53]

A major issue of contention, given this return to capitalism, is whether thirty years of Ba'thism had been a detour, delaying Syria's inevitable reintegration into the world capitalist economy and saddling it with a regressive patrimonial state. Alternatively, in some respects the Ba'th period could be seen as a necessary stage that left Syria with a stronger state that had broken down class and communal cleavages and produced a more diversified economy. While Syria specialists with command of the history of Syria's pathway tended to be more receptive to the latter view, most economists and pundits and many Syrian economists themselves, convinced by the 'Washington consensus', took the former as a matter of course. What few disputed, however, was that Ba'thist socialism as a developmental model had reached a dead-end.

Political liberalization in Syria accompanied but was yet more limited than economic liberalization, amounting to a mere decompression of authoritarian controls and greater access for the bourgeoisie to decision-makers; the legitimation of pluralism (*taddadidya*) in regime discourse envisioned it as a *substitute for*, not a stage toward, democratization.[54] Perthes and Balhout charted the rise and political co-optation of fractions of a new business class in this period.[55] Other work looked to the development of civil society as a component of this new pluralism.[56] On the death of Hafiz, civil society, in the 'Damascus Spring', briefly mobilized to demand democratization, but, as George showed, was soon repressed.[57] Nevertheless, the earlier decompression deepened as the grip of the security forces became less obtrusive under Bashar al-Asad.

Succession and Power Consolidation under Bashar al-Asad

Zisser's 2001 book provided a balanced overview of the juncture Syria had reached in the late Hafiz period and of the challenges from within and without that the regime faced as it prepared for leadership succession.[58] In the run-up to succession, many debated whether institutions would provide for an orderly transfer of power, whether the opposition would mobilize once the feared strongman departed or the regime even disintegrate in internecine struggle – unleashing a 'Lebanonization' of the country; certainly many Syrians feared for the country's hard won stability.

The actual outcome was remarkably smooth but something less than an institution-mediated succession: the party and army elite closed ranks and, to prevent a power struggle, ratified the process Hafiz had began, but not completed, of establishing his son, Bashar, as his successor. According to Lesch, he was seen as a natural choice who would not betray his father's heritage (not be a Sadat) and, as an Asad, would reassure the Alawis; yet he was popular as a modernizer with the public, especially with the younger generation, and hence represented both continuity and change.[59] Lesch dismisses claims that the smooth succession showed the regime's institutions worked – rather the elites came together in a consensus; yet these elites

were those who held the top institutional offices and otherwise lacked personal power bases.

But was Syria becoming, in the words of Saad ad-Din Ibrahim, a 'Jumrukiyya' (republican monarchy) or was rule by collective leadership replacing personal rule? Debate after Basher's succession centered around how much power the new president, surrounded by an 'old guard' surviving his father's death, actually exercised. That, unlike his father, Bashar was not, as Zisser observed, a product of the military or party system, hence lacked a personal power base, seemed to make him vulnerable to challenge or at least constraint from the old guard.[60] Three years later, Perthes found that Bashar had established himself as 'the prime decision maker' and while he had to share power, his reform team represented the dominant tendency in the regime. He also engineered, within three years of succession, a renovation of the political elite, with a turnover of 60% in top offices via retirement, thereby transferring power to a new generation.[61] That, by 2005, he had consolidated his power without resort to violence, purges, or repression and through legal and institutional means was rather remarkable.

Also debated was how far Bashar stood for reform and if so, how much freedom he had to push change. There were great expectations of major reform on Bashar's succession. Perthes argued that Bashar's priorities were reflected in those he recruited to ministerial office, most of whom can be characterized as technocrats with Western advanced degrees in economics and engineering and favoring integration into the world economy. Lesch, having had access to the president himself, gives the most developed account of Bashar's views and Leverett's analysis largely agrees with him.[62] In their view, Ba'thist ideology no longer governed policy and liberalizing reform was a strategic choice; yet Bashar lacked an elaborate blueprint to substitute for Ba'thism and proceeded by trial and error. Acutely aware of the risks of going too fast and provoking enemies before he had built up his own reformist faction, Bashar saw reform as a gradual process, in which he had to proceed in small steps so as to not to risk stability or make mistakes. He also saw himself as constrained by the lack of enough human capital to reform rapidly. Syria would pursue a middle way: bucking the neo-liberal trend in regard to crash privatization, the shrinking of the public sector would have to run parallel with growing of the private sector, not precede it; at the same time, joining the Euro-Med partnership would lower barriers to global integration and undermine crony capitalist vested interests obstructing a deepening of the market economy. However, bureaucratic, legal, and political obstacles slowed down even this modest reform program, while corruption, crony capitalists, the lack of account-ability, and continual regional conflict remained major disincentives to getting the investment that alone could make reform a success.

In the political sphere, Perthes argues that Bashar's project can be understood as 'modernizing authoritarianism', making the system work

better so that it could survive and deliver development. The first priorities were to foster modernizing cadres and to combat chaos, waste, and corruption through increased accountability and transparency (facilitated, for example, by IT) and by strengthening state institutions through administrative reform and rule of law. But Syria was not, Bashar believed, ready for imported Western-style democracy and while political change would eventually come about, it would build upon social and economic modernization rather than precede it. Clearly, the East European collapse, Algerian civil war, and Lebanese and Iraqi disorders are cautionary tales for the regime, especially in a mosaic society and when external forces are fishing in troubled waters. Syria aspired to follow, instead, the East Asian model of economic modernization first, then democratization.

The State and the International Level

International forces – imperialism and war – have profoundly shaped the Syrian state. Imperialism's frustration of its identity set Syria on a radical Arab nationalist tangent while the resulting wars, notably those of 1967, 1973 and the struggle with Israel in Lebanon, led to the construction of a national security state. Seale's two classic books illustrate the changing nexus between inside and out admirably: in the first, Syria was a weak state, destabilized and radicalized by the external 'struggle for Syria;' in the second, Asad, socialized into realist caution by the 1967 war, shaped the stable regime needed to conduct a 'realist' struggle with Israel and 'for the Middle East'.[63]

A more critical view was that external threats were used, exaggerated, even needed and provoked in order to legitimize an unpopular regime at home; thus Pipes and Kedar argued that Asad's struggle with Israel was meant to divert attention from repressive minority rule at home.[64] Lawson's work tries to link domestic economic crises and the conflicts these provoke within the ruling coalition, to foreign adventures, especially when these are expected to allow the regime to access the resources to appease its coalition: the 1967 war is explained by the need to direct discontent outward and win external aid and the 1976 intervention in Lebanon by the aim of acquiring resources there.[65]

But the relation of inside to outside was more complicated than this and varied according to factors such as the external power balance and regime consolidation at home. It is true that in the fragile early Syrian regimes, external threats were used by rival politicians in their power struggles but Syria was more victim than actor in this period. Under the radical Ba'th regime (1963–70) foreign policy played a major role in intra-regime conflicts while economic crises and sectarian tensions did exacerbate its need to seek legitimacy through nationalist 'outbidding' that led, albeit, unintentionally, to the 1967 war. The country could not hope to isolate itself from the turbulence in its regional environment, but only

after Asad consolidated the regime could it hope to react effectively and even extract resources from this environment: become a player instead of a victim. To take the case of Iraq, by contrast to the late sixties when Iraq was a source of ideological subversion, regime consolidation allowed Asad to play a Machiavellian role in the 1980s Iran–Iraq war, striking a strategic alliance with non-Arab Iran, largely driven by his priorities in the struggle with Israel.[66] As for Syria's involvement in Lebanon, Asad initially intervened defensively to head off Israeli penetration and the potential spillover of sectarian strife; later however, regime elites extracted economic benefits from business, smuggling and protection rackets in the country; most recently, Lebanon has again become a point of leverage used by its enemies against the regime.[67]

As regards Hafiz al-Asad's main priority, his ongoing confrontation with Israel, this did indeed allow the regime to access external aid. But the claim that Syria 'sold' its foreign policy for rent ignores that Asad often sacrificed economic to strategic goals; e.g., he actually jeopardized Arab aid through policies in Lebanon and toward Iran meant to strengthen his hand against Israel. Syrian regimes pursued nationalist policies because Syria manifestly did have powerful grievances and faced real, not invented, external threats that its people expected the state to counter. Asad constructed and justified his national security state as a response to such threats, but he did not 'need' them; on the contrary, a plethora of writings in the nineties documented the fact that the Asad regime was seriously seeking a peace settlement with Israel and expected an 'honorable peace' to bring a legitimacy bonus, hence that its legitimacy did not depend on unremitting conflict.[68] It is thus, misguided to mechanically explain foreign policy militancy in terms of domestic economic or political problems and needs, but it is indisputable that they are intimately linked.

The powerful impact of the external environment on domestic politics seems underlined by developments under Bashar al-Asad. After the failure of the peace process, which had been thought a necessary complement of economic reform, Bashar's economic reforms slowed, while, to consolidate his legitimacy at home, he adopted a hard line toward Israel amidst the al-Aqsa intifadah and opposed the US invasion of Iraq; this, in arousing intense American hostility, soured the international environment for his economic reforms. The Hariri affair, a product of the struggle for Lebanon, obstructed the adhesion to the Euro-med partnership that Syrian reformers expected would give them leverage over entrenched anti-reform interests. Zisser saw Bashar's defiance of the West as a mistake deriving from his inexperience.[69] But given Syria's Arab nationalist identity, it is hard to see how he could have acted much differently.

The ongoing consequences of external forces are set to continue powerfully impacting Syria, with the spillover of Iraqi refugees and a re-newed struggle for Lebanon between Syrian and US/Saudi proxies fraught with danger for Damascus. The coming challenges for Syria will

be reflected in future historiography, which is likely to revolve around its main current dilemma, whether it can reconcile its turn to a market economy integrating into the world capitalist system with continued regional conflict and the hostility of the world hegemon without sacrificing its Arab nationalist identity. Born as a product of war and imperialism, Syria's fate remains inextricably tied to regional and international struggles in good part outside of its control.

Short Biography

Raymond Hinnebusch is Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies there. He took his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pittsburgh (1975) and is the author of numerous works on Syria including *Syria, Revolution from Above* (Routledge, 2001), *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Westview Press, 1990) and *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development* (Westview Press, 1989).

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* Correspondence address: University of St. Andrews – International Relations, North Street, St. Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL, United Kingdom. Email: rh10@st-andrews.ac.uk.

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