CHANGE HELD IN ABEYANCE: DURABILITY AND VULNERABILITY IN ASAD'S SYRIA

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Change in Syria appears to be held in abeyance. Peace negotiations with Israel have halted. Economic liberalization has reached a plateau while political decompression falls short of even the modest liberalization allowed in Egypt and Jordan. Hafiz al-Asad built his state to conduct the struggle with Israel; as long as the struggle continues and he rules, he will sponsor no major reform. Innovation from below is deterred by uncertainties over the peace process and fear of the deluge which could follow Asad's demise.

The Syrian regime's durability defies expectations. Observers have predicted Syria's collapse or transformation to result from any number of obstacles it has faced: the Islamic uprising, the economic stagnation of the 1980s, the end of the Cold War, and economic globalization and democratization. Some pundits, arguing that Syrian foreign policy has been designed primarily to manage domestic threats, have doubted Syria's ability to reach a satisfactory peace with Israel. Domestic vulnerability has distorted Syria's foreign policy and therefore it cannot rationally cope with the external arena, they contend. Reflecting the need for an external enemy to justify minority

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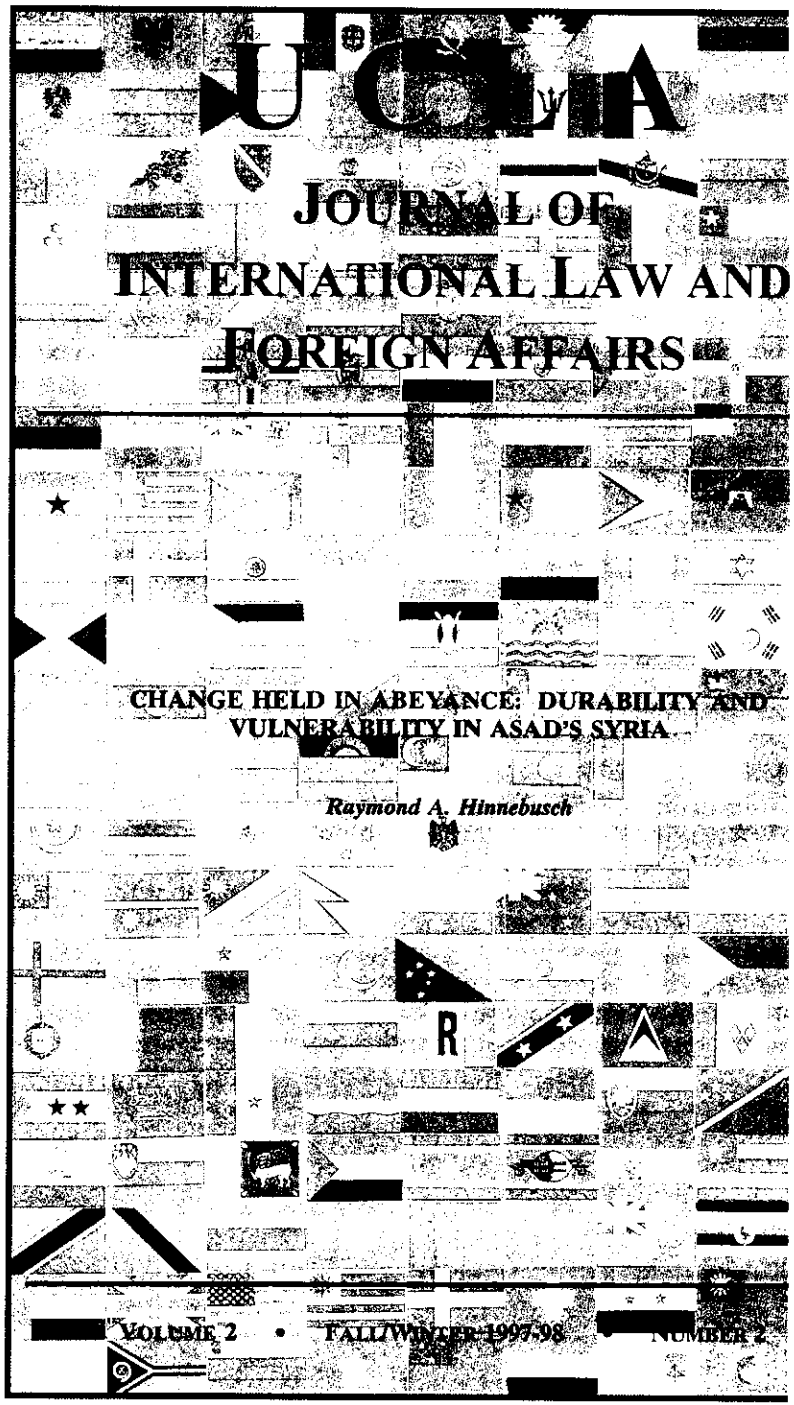

rule and repression at home, the regime maintains a rigid inflexibility towards Israel.[1]

Nevertheless, it is arguable that what is most striking about Syria is the remarkable durability of the regime and the rationality and consistency of its foreign policy. Moreover, it is relative stability at home that has permitted consistency abroad. How long can this continue? The regime has evaded the consequences of many of the dilemmas it faces rather than solved them; and the same techniques used to establish stability in the immediate term are also vulnerabilities which obstruct the requisites of long term durability.

I. BONAPARTIST AUTHORITARIAN-POPULISM: COMPLEXITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The Asad regime's complex structure has enabled it to adapt incrementally to challenges. The regime can be usefully conceptualized as a late-development version of a Bonapartist state. This model of the state is a common artifact of the process of transformation from feudalism to capitalism. The bourgeoisie in such a state has not yet consolidated itself into a coherent entity and cannot exert its normal capacity to dominate the state. The weakness of the bourgeoisie allows the state, which is dominated by a personalistic leader, to achieve relative autonomy in its decision-making, relying on nationalist/populist legitimization, the military and bureaucracy, and the mobilization of plebeian forces (typically the lumpenproletariat--marginalized underemployed elements--and the peasantry) for support.[2] The late Bonapartist state is skewed toward neo-patrimonialism--the use of personalistic leadership and clientalism to hold together the artificial states created under imperialism. It is also

[1] *See* DANIEL PIPES, GREATER SYRIA: THE HISTORY OF AN AMBITION (1990); DANIEL PIPES, SYRIA BEYOND THE PEACE PROCESS (Washington Institute for Near East Policy No. 40, 1995); FRED LAWSON, WHY SYRIA GOES TO WAR (1996).

[2] For the classic sketch of the model, see Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *in* SELECTED WORKS [OF] KARL MARX AND FREDRICK ENGELS 96, 97-168 (International Publishers ed., 1968).

biased toward statism, owing to the need of late-developing countries in world society for an activist state, as well as to the influence of socialism in the bipolar post-World War II era. The mixed economy--the co-existence of public and private sectors--both advances development and delays emergence of a full market economy.

In the Syrian case, the radical Ba'thists (1963-70) achieved autonomy by breaking control of the dominant classes over the means of production (through nationalization and the effectuation of land reform), and by mobilizing workers and peasants through the Ba'th party. After his ascent to rule in 1970, Asad continued to increase autonomy by concentrating power in a virtual "Presidential Monarchy." He accomplished this by using the army to free himself from party ideological constraints and by building up a *jama'a* or grouping of personal followers largely recruited from the *Alawi* Islamic minority sect to which he belongs. Dominating the security forces, this armed lumpenproletariat of formerly underemployed villagers gave him autonomy from both party and army, while he fostered a state-dependent new bourgeoisie as an additional leg of support to further minimize dependence on the others. This mix of traditional and modern strategies has produced a complex state: patrimonial *asabiyya* (group solidarity emanating from real or imagined kinship ties) acts to solidify an elite core of supporters drawn from the Alawi community; bureaucratic instruments control opposition; and Leninist/corporatist structures incorporate a mass constituency, particularly from the village (who are won over by land reform, political recruitment, state jobs, and education), into the ruling structure. In regards to the economy, the public sector has become a font of patronage for both the rural plebeians and the new bourgeoisie. The mixed economy thus relieves the regime of over-dependence on either the public or private sectors.[3]

The claim that the regime created and incorporated a peasant base (through land reform and co-operatives) is sometimes dismissed. Strong evidence suggests, however, that the Ba'th party's rural

[3] *See* RAYMOND A. HINNEBUSCH, AUTHORITARIAN POWER AND STATE FORMATION IN BA'THIST SYRIA: ARMY, PARTY AND PEASANT 120-55 (1990). *See also* VOLKER PERTHES, THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SYRIA UNDER ASAD ch. 4 (1995).

penetration was effective and that agrarian reform created a state-dependent middle and small peasantry. Large land holdings were reduced from 50% to 18% of the land surface; the increase in middle and small holdings from 50% to 82% broadened the middle and rich peasantry, while landless peasants were reduced from 60% to 37% of rural families. The 85% of small peasants controlling one third of the land surface, who were incorporated into state co-operatives, gave the authoritarian-populist state a rural social base analogous to the large land-owning class which supports conservative authoritarianism.[4]

Its complexity has enabled the Syrian state to weather several challenges. The Islamic rebellion (1978-82), a massive if sporadic armed uprising by the Islamic wing of the urban middle class, was the major test of regime survival. The regime defeated this challenge in part because firm Alawi control of the repressive apparatus deterred a possible split along sectarian lines. But equally decisive was the fact that the regime's rural base, incorporated through Leninist organization, co-operatives, and bureaucratic recruitment, remained loyal; if revolution requires simultaneous urban and rural rebellion, the regime's Leninist/populist strategy of incorporating a mass constituency obstructed it. A unidimensional regime would likely have collapsed in the face of this major Islamic mobilization.

In the 1980s, the seeming failure of state capitalist import substitute industrialization (ISI), manifest in a capital accumulation crisis, combined with the decline of external rent, brought on economic stagnation. As in Egypt, the regime might have been captured by a liberal wing of the state bourgeoisie who were prepared to use the crisis to share power with private and international capital and concede regional superiority to Israel. However, the state adapted to the crisis through a two-pronged strategy which involved the state and private sectors. First, austerity measures and minimal debt secured the state's economic base and immunized it to International Monetary Fund pressures until the diversification of rent (from domestic oil revenues, Iranian and Arab Gulf funds, and discounted Soviet arms) relieved the financial pressure on the state. Second,

[4] RAYMOND A. HINNEBUSCH, PEASANT AND BUREAUCRACY IN BA'THIST SYRIA: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT 107-11, 177 (1989).

further incremental economic liberalization, especially the new investment law, No. 10 of 1991, elicited a burst of private investment which appeased the merchant and middle classes and, together with the export of labor to the Gulf and Lebanon, relieved part of the burden of economic growth and employment from the public sector.[5] The results of this strategy thus preserved the state's autonomy.

II. ADAPTATION TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The end of bipolarity was a major challenge to a supposedly artificial Syrian regime bloated on Cold War largesse. The withdrawal of Soviet protection, arms and aid, the demonstration effect of communist collapse, and global democratization all posed challenges to the regime. Yet, in spite of the fragility attributed to the regime, it has adapted domestically and externally without conceding its autonomy.

Asad is pursuing a strategy of limited liberalization, which is meant to diversify the regime's political base and recharge its capacity to defend its autonomy by balancing the regime above social forces. This requires more securely incorporating additional elements of the bourgeoisie into Asad's regime, thereby dividing this class while balancing it against the Alawis and Ba'thists. Reduced dependency on the army and party has preempted any challenges to economic liberalization or the peace process. Yet, while the power of the Ba'th has been downgraded, the dominant party has neither been pluralized nor transformed into a party of the bourgeoisie, as occurred in Egypt. It still incorporates a partly-Sunni rural base that Asad needs--if only to balance the Alawi *jama'a* and the Sunni urban bourgeois.[6]

[5] *See* Volker Perthes, *The Syrian Economy in the 1980s*, 46 MIDDLE E. J. 37-58 (1992); PATRICK CLAWSON, UNAFFORDABLE AMBITIONS: SYRIA'S MILITARY BUILD-UP AND ECONOMIC CRISIS (1989); Steven Heydemann, *The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilization in Syria*, *in* THE POLITICS OF ECONOMIC REFORM IN THE MIDDLE EAST 11-37 (Henri J. Barkey ed., 1992); EBERHARD KIENLE, CONTEMPORARY SYRIA: LIBERALIZATION BETWEEN COLD WAR AND COLD PEACE (1994).

[6] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Asad's Syria and the New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival*, 2 MIDDLE E. POL'Y 4 (1993).

Broader political liberalization is not on the agenda; it could unleash the anti-regime resentment of older, unco-opted elements of the bourgeoisie, or enable political Islam to play the sectarian card. Pressures for liberalization have been readily contained: the co-opted bourgeoisie has deferred demands for more power in return for business freedom and security, while the middle class intelligentsia remains fragmented and isolated from the masses.

Rather, Asad's strategy is corporatist--that is, regime-sanctioned interest groups get access to decision-makers and in return deliver the acquiescence of their members. Business interest groups, notably the Syrian Chamber of Commerce, have acquired access to decision-makers, transforming Syria's populist corporatism--in which the worker and peasant unions enjoyed privileged access--to the more conventional corporatism in which the state balances among popular and bourgeois interest groups. In this situation, business groups are committed to support the regime's economic strategy and can also press their interests and deflect arbitrary interference in the private sector at the same time. Concomitantly, a wider array of social forces--members of old families, ambitious nouveau riche businessmen, and neighborhood notables--have been co-opted into parliament. Although they are allowed a bit of patronage and scope to intervene on behalf of constituents with the bureaucracy, these "independents" have not organized to contest government policy. Finally, a substantial political decompression has lifted the draconian controls of the 1980s and allowed greater personal and business freedom.[7]

The regime's populist constituency has not yet been fully demobilized or excluded. Access points for mass syndicates so far remain more effective than in Egypt, enabling the trade unions to defend the public sector and labor rights and the peasant unions to preempt a rollback in agrarian reform. The unions retain greater clout to defend popular interests precisely because Syria's lesser level of liberalization has not permitted the growth of business power comparable to that in Egypt. The regime is more autonomous of the bourgeoisie, but its relations with the bourgeoisie being less secure, it can less easily afford to offend its populist constituency than can the

[7] Volker Perthes, *The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th*, MIDDLE E. REP, May-June 1991, at 21.

regime in Egypt.[8] Recognizing this reality, the regime has contracted populism without wholly abandoning it. As a result, although austerity in the 1980s cut jobs and squeezed government workers between inflation and salary freezes, many were able to go into petty business on the side. Subsidies have been cut, but commodities are still sold below cost in poor neighborhoods. Agricultural policy has produced relative prosperity in villages.

Mass opposition to economic liberalization requires a populist ideology which is lacking in Syria. Marxism has been discredited and political Islam, which mobilizes the victims of liberalization elsewhere in the Middle East, espouses a free market ideology in Syria. Asad, well aware that political Islam remains the most credible opposition, has been co-opting the Islamic mainstream, while marginalizing radical elements. As Islamic opposition has traditionally reflected the displeasure of the bourgeoisie and the *suq* (literally, "market," here referring to merchants) to socialism, economic liberalization could advance a détente with the regime by reducing the potential for political Islam to gain a strong backing from its traditional power base.[9]

III. FOREIGN POLICY CONSISTENCY

A. *Domestic Constraints Minimized*

Foreign policymaking in Syria is the "reserved sphere" of the Presidency. It is not subject to bureaucratic politics in which hawkish or dovish factions can shape or veto the president's decisions. Periodic rotation of office-holders prevents regime barons from staffing their domains with durable clients and establishing independent power bases. Moreover, there is scant evidence that Asad has ever allowed economic constraints to force foreign policy

[8] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: The Politics of Economic Liberalization*, 18 THIRD WORLD Q. 253-61 (1997).

[9] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *State and Islamism in Syria*, *in* ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM 210-12 (Abdel Salam Sidahmad & Anoushirivan Ehteshami eds., 1996).

decisions that would not otherwise have been taken on strategic grounds. Thus, in the 1980s, when the Syrian economy was in crisis, Asad remained immovable on Israel and on policies which antagonized his Gulf donors. Conversely, he has joined the current peace process at a time when the economy has come out of the doldrums.

Nor is public opinion a direct constraint. Asad has made several unpopular foreign policy decisions, notably the 1976 intervention against the PLO in Lebanon, the alignment with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, and siding with the Western coalition against Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait. Restraints on foreign policy are instead *indirect*: political wisdom dictates that Asad take account of the impact of foreign policy on the nationalist legitimacy of the regime.[10]

B. *The Foreign Policy Rational Actor?*

Because domestic constraints on foreign policymaking are minimal, Syrian foreign policy is most immediately shaped by the geopolitical factors stressed in the rational actor model. For Syria, the main geopolitical imperatives are, firstly, its historic anti-Israeli irredentism and rivalry with Israel over influence in the Levant, and secondly, the irreversibility of Israel's creation and the reality of its superior power. Rationality is manifest in several aspects of Asad's deft reconciliation of these two imperatives. First, Asad's rationality is evidenced by his limited, consistent goals. He discarded the unrealistic aim of liberating Palestine, but, in pursuing a land-for-peace settlement with Israel, Asad stood fast for twenty-five years on total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied lands. Second, Asad's rationality is also apparent in his matching of means and ends. His scaling down of Syria's objectives was matched by a significant upgrading in its military capability to give his diplomacy credibility. Finally, Asad's classification as a rational actor is firmly established

[10] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revisionist Dream, Realist Strategies*, *in* THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF ARAB STATES 283, 299-303 (Bahgat Korany & Ali E. Hillal Dessouki eds., 1984); David Waldner, *More Than Meets the Eye: Economic Influence on Contemporary Syrian Foreign Policy*, MIDDLE E. INSIGHT May-June 1995, at 34-37.

by his strategic adaptability. Asad adapted Syria's strategies, mixing military and diplomatic means, as conditions dictated. Thus, when the effort to militarily retake the Golan in the 1973 war failed, Asad entered the Kissinger-sponsored negotiations with Israel. When Egypt's separate peace destroyed his diplomatic hand, Asad obstructed U.S. efforts to bypass Syria (through Israeli agreements with Lebanon and Jordan) until his drive for "strategic parity" could restore his negotiating hand. When Soviet decline deprived Asad of a military option, he took advantage of the Gulf War to win U.S. acceptance as a responsible power whose interests should be recognized in peace diplomacy. Asad's foreign policy is readily explainable as an adaptation to the external balance of power; domestic political explanations are simply superfluous.[11]

C. *Syria in the Peace Process*

Asad entered the Madrid peace process with the aim of maximizing territorial recovery and minimizing "normalization of relations" with Israel. As former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres put it, Asad conducted the peace process "just as one conducts a military campaign--slowly, patiently, directed by strategic and tactical considerations."[12] Consistency is evident in Asad's refusal to submit to superior power, even as he strives to redress post-Cold War regional imbalances against Syria. He has tightened his alliance with Iran, diversified arms supplies (notably from North Korea and China), exploited the pressure the Shi'ite militia Hizbollah puts on Israel in southern Lebanon, and tried to extract leverage in the peace negotiations from the U.S. desire for a Syrian-Israeli peace settlement that would possibly isolate Iran and Iraq.

Adaptability is also evident in Syria's diplomacy. For example, no progress toward peace with Israel was possible under the Shamir government. However, Labor's admission after it won control of the

[11] For the best analysis of Syrian foreign policy, see PATRICK SEALE, ASAD: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST (1988).

[12] *Peres Comments on Factors Affecting Syrian Policy*, BBC SUMMARY OF WORLD BROADCASTS, Aug. 3, 1993, *available in* LEXIS/NEXIS, News Library, Bbcswb File.

Knesset that the Golan was Syrian territory stimulated Asad to break the deadlock over whether Israel's commitment to withdrawal from the Golan Heights or Syria's normalization of relations with Israel had to come first. Syrian negotiator Mowaffak Allaf put forth a formula under which *the more land Israel conceded the more peace it could have* and Israel responded that *the depth of withdrawal would correspond to the scope of peace*. Asad then agreed to establish normal relations in the area in return for full Israeli withdrawal.[13]

Syria also agreed to leapfrog a formal resolution of the core issues and to start negotiations on the security arrangements over which agreement would have to be reached if Israel were to withdraw from the Golan. Syria conceded asymmetrical de-militarized zones, but negotiations stalled over an Israeli demand for a surveillance station on Mount Hermon. This was viewed as an affront to Syrian sovereignty, which Asad took as evidence that Yitzak Rabin was not yet ready to strike a deal.

Watersheds and breakdowns in the negotiations were shaped by Israeli initiatives and Syria's calculation of what the balance of power would allow Syria to achieve. Syrian domestic politics defined only the broad--but by no means unchangeable--boundaries of what could be sold to the regime's domestic constituencies. The Alawis, who are set to retain their dominant positions in the post-peace downsized army and security forces, have not opposed a settlement. The economic consequences of peace have not attracted or repelled the regime sufficiently to be a decisive factor in its policy. Public opinion did not deter pursuit of the less-than-comprehensive settlement which appeared in the cards after Oslo: the separate Palestinian and Jordanian deals with Israel at Syria's expense convinced Syrians that the government had to give priority to Syria's interest in recovery of the Golan. Asad lamented: "What can we do since the others have left us and gone forward?"[14] In short, there were no irresistible domestic

[13] MOSHE MA'OZ, SYRIA AND ISRAEL: FROM WAR TO PEACE-MAKING 223-52 (1995); Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Does Syria Want Peace? Syrian Policy in the Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations*, 26 J. PALESTINE STUD. 51-55 (1996).

[14] Andrew Album, *The Battle for the Golan Heights*, MIDDLE E., Sept. 1995, at 8.

pressures on the regime either to reject a Golan-for-peace deal or to make concessions in order to reach one.

The May 1996 Likud election victory put an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement in grave jeopardy. The claim that Asad failed to reach an agreement with Labor because he never wanted one does not withstand scrutiny. Syrian concessions helped put an agreement within striking distance. Rabin sought to use the possibility of a Likud victory to leverage Asad into an agreement which left territorial withdrawal contingent on Israeli satisfaction with the progress of normalization of relations, but Asad could not accept an Oslo-like agreement which left the outcome so open-ended. It was Israel, not Syria, that suspended the negotiations. The Islamic groups whose terrorism contributed to the Likud victory are indigenous to the occupied territories, not a Syrian instrument for scuttling the peace process. Asad will probably bide his time until there is a further change in Israeli leadership or strategy or a favorable shift in the balance of power; he will not bow before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's threat to increase settlements on the Golan unless Syria re-negotiates agreements reached with Rabin. The only domestic development which could possibly change this would be Asad's death.

IV. VULNERABILITIES

The same techniques which stabilized the Syrian state--neo-patrimonialism and populism--are ironically obstacles to the requisites of its longer term durability, namely political institutionalization and capitalist development.

A. *Succession Without Institutionalization*

The immediate threat to stability in Syria is a succession crisis. The personalization of the regime makes stability dependent on the leader, who is ailing. The consistent attempts to groom Asad's sons--first Basil until his death, and now the much less credible Bash'shar--make it inescapable that Asad seeks a dynastic solution, evidently for

fear that otherwise a power struggle could shatter the regime along sectarian lines which would open the door to elite alliances with societal forces or even revolution. The 1984 struggle between Asad's brother Rifat and other regime barons when Asad fell sick was peacefully settled only by his intervention. While the regime elite may stick together in the short term, collective leadership appears unsustainable over the long term. Asad's weakening of the party and parliament makes peaceful evolution via a Turkish scenario--where the ruling party provides a successor who initiates political liberalization--less likely.

B. *Unconsolidated Class Base?*

If the regime elite constituted, together with the private sector, a new class with a stake in the state, they could preserve stability and launch capitalist development. However, the Bonapartist state, balancing between classes and diverse economic bases, deters such class consolidation. A "military-mercantile complex" of Alawi officers and Damascene merchants emerged in the 1970s, while in the 1990s the children of the Ba'thi elite and the Sunni bourgeoisie have increasingly gone into business together. But this alliance of the state and the private bourgeois is retarded by: (1) the sectarian cleavage, manifest in the dearth of Alawi-Sunni elite intermarriages and the desire of the Alawis to keep the Sunni bourgeoisie as a mere junior partner; (2) a lack of political confidence by investors, owing to the origins of the regime in populist revolution against the landed/capitalist classes, systemic corruption, absence of rule of law, and fear of instability; and (3) statist economic constraints, such as the persistence of a competing public sector strong enough to keep privatization off the agenda but too weak to resist private rent-seeking at its expense. Long awaited reforms necessary to sustain private investment, notably permitting private banking and a stock market, have been stalled by statist resistance.

Economic liberalization has given the appearance of prosperity for some; high growth rates in the early 1990s have not wholly petered out. But statist exhaustion has made the regime more dependent on private investment as its proportion of total investment increased, from

29% in 1975 to 66% in 1992.[15] There has been new investment under Law No. 10, but much is speculative, temporary, or tertiary, and international investment outside the oil sector is negligible. Only peace with Israel and further liberalization can elicit the investment needed to replace the inevitably declining wartime rent the regime has subsisted on. Both, however, are currently on hold--indefinitely.

[15] CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC, ANNUAL STATISTICAL BULLETIN OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND LABOR 503 (1993).