

Syria and the Arab Spring: Unraveling the Road to Syria's Protracted Conflict

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The so-called Arab Spring was started by people who were inspired by universal ideals to put an end to authoritarian rule and corruption and to demand liberty, dignity and social justice. Although these demands have transcended the borders of various Arab countries, their trajectories and outcome have differed because Arab regimes are diverse among themselves in terms of their ruling mechanisms, domestic power structures, international relations, and the societies they have ruled.

The 'Syrian Spring' began gradually in March 2011 but escalated into a violent conflict that drew in regional and international actors and various competing opposition and regime forces. The ensuing bloodshed and deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Syria, the failure of the United Nations Security Council to reach a consensus on what action to take, as it did on Libya, and the involvement of contending external actors partially reflect the complexity of the current impasse. The ruthless rule of the Baathist regime that has held its grip on power through decades of repression and torture, and the army's brutal repression of the protest movement since March 2011, have led to the gradual disintegration of the state and the shredding of Syria's social fabric.

In order to understand the Syrian uprising and its level of violence—now the high-

est in the Arab world—we need to know the basics of Syria’s history, the power structure of the Assad regime and the nature of state building and state-society relations under his rule.

Historical Background

Until its independence from France in 1946, Syria had never constituted a unified state or separate political entity. Syria had always been part of various empires or controlled by external rulers such as the Persians, Greeks and Romans. From 1516 to the end of World War I, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. The French and the British had promised to make Syria an independent kingdom after the Arab army defeated the Ottomans and captured Damascus. But with the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, the French and the British divided between them the provinces of the Ottoman Empire situated outside the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, in 1920, the League of Nations handed Syria and Lebanon as mandated territories over to France.

Between 1920 and 1946, the French prevented the development of the Syrian national community by dividing the country into several administrative and political units along regional and sectarian lines. The French also fostered sectarian, class and communal separatism, widening the gap between the majority Sunnis and various minorities by recruiting members of the Alawite and Druze minorities for its “Special Troupes of the Levant.” At independence in 1946, therefore, Syria lacked an exclusive central authority that could serve as a focus of identity and loyalty for the whole population; instead, Syria was a geographical expression with no unified political identity or community.

Syria’s troubled political and economic pre- and post-independence era and the defeat in the 1948 Arab war with Israel intensified conflict between politicians and army officers who capitalized on popular discontent to legitimize military take-overs.¹ This accounts for a succession of military coups (more than 10 successful ones between 1949 and 1970) and the rising influence of various military factions in politics and power struggles. Post-independence instability and increasing polarization in the political system led the elites to dissolve the Syrian Arab Republic

and create in 1958 a political union with Gamal Nasser's Egypt, the United Arab Republic. The union collapsed in 1961, followed by the first Ba'ath military coup in 1963. Although it failed, the union was a turning point in modern Syria under which three important developments took place: (1) all political parties were banned; (2) a comprehensive agrarian reform law was introduced; and (3) socialist reforms were initiated through the nationalization of major sectors of the economy.² In other words, the union accelerated the process of state expansion by exporting the Egyptian system of economic and political management and laid the basis for consolidating one-party rule that used the state to advance development and block the formation of independent social, political or civil organizations.

The promise of egalitarianism was the pillar upon which the Ba'ath Party legitimized its rule while institutionalizing state linkage to peasants, farmers and the working class. Furthermore, the nationalization of industry and commerce, which brought the economy fully under state control, was decisive in transforming Syria's power and social structure. In all this, the regime promised stability and social security. Originally, the Ba'athist regime in Syria built its political power on mass rural mobilization and applying drastic socialist reforms. What was most transformed under the Ba'ath Party was the character of the ruling class: a new rural-based elite replaced the urban rich of Damascus and Aleppo. For its main support base, the Ba'ath Party recruited those who were outside the system of patronage and connections, such as rural professionals, teachers, doctors, students and minorities. The Ba'athist campaigns of secularism, socialism, and Arab nationalism promised equitable income distribution and the reduction of inequalities between the periphery and center and between rich and poor. Yet one outcome was sectarian mobilization among depressed groups who benefited from the reduction of inequalities as well as upward mobility mainly among the minorities.

The planned course of radical social transformation, however, took a different path after Syria's decisive defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967 and Israel's capture and annexation of the Golan Heights. The defeat exacerbated a split within the Ba'ath Party: reformists/pragmatists led by Hafiz al-Assad differed with radicals led by Salah Jadid on how to deal with the consequences of the war. The reformist/pragmatist wing, which had a strong base in the military, held that radi

-cal Ba‘thist reforms undermined national unity, increased Syria’s regional isolation and provoked military escalation by Israel and the West.³ Thus, Assad’s coup of 1970, dubbed the “Corrective Movement,” removed the radicals from key positions in the party and state institutions, and maintained the broad lines of the Ba‘thist program. By being more pragmatic and less ideological the Assad camp paved the way for new regional, economic and political shifts that consolidated Assad’s rule and prevented the recurrence of military coups, institutional factionalism, and wars with Israel.

The Pillars of Assad’s Rule

In a weak state like Syria, Assad aimed to create a cohesive regime by conflating its identity with that of the state. Hence, any effort to dislodge the regime was interpreted as a challenge to the state itself. Unlike regimes in strong states with strong national identity, however, the military was loyal not to the state, but to the regime. Assad’s regime constructed three important reservoirs of power for its preservation: (1) a cohesive elite structure of power in direct control of state institutions; (2) a cohesive business sector dependent on the regime; and (3) the adoption of violence as a modality of governance.

1. The construction of a cohesive elite structure

The last military coup in modern Syria (celebrated as the Corrective Movement) was accomplished by Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Assad re-organized power relations in order to stay in power and prevent another military coup. The most important thing for Assad was to pre-empt party factionalism within the military and the Ba‘th party by filling the Ba‘th party and security apparatuses with loyal members of his clan while building patronage networks with other minorities. He also made sure to co-opt key military Sunni families to contain dissent inside the military.

Since Egypt had a strong national identity, common history and centralized rule, its regime did not have to expand state institutions and ideologically penetrate the coercive apparatus and bureaucracy to seek mass mobilization and control. This allowed Egypt’s ruler to relinquish Arab nationalism and grant a degree of political freedom to civil society while “power was still heavily concentrated in the hands of

the president.”⁴ While Egypt’s presidential institution had centralized authority, it mainly used the former ruling National Democratic Party to extend economic and political networks of patronage and to co-opt the elite and the opposition.

In Syria, however, cooptation depended on a wider set of state institutions and power-sharing mechanisms. The Ba‘th Party and the presidency shared power based on the party apparatus, military-police establishment and ministerial bureaucracy: “Through these interlocking institutions the top political elite seeks to settle intra-elite conflicts and design public policy, and, through their command posts, to implement policy and control society.”⁵ The Ba‘th Party penetrated all state institutions and civil society organizations while the party’s military organization exercised political control over military members.⁶ Overlapping state institutions in Syria made the ruling coalition and the political system far more institutionally interlocked than its counterparts in other authoritarian Arab regimes and the preservation of such a coalition was vitally important to the survival of the regime and its institutions. In such a structure, other institutions also relied on their co-optative capacity for survival and maintaining its importance vis-à-vis other state institutions.

Thus, elite cooptation is not only the function of the ruling party (as in Egypt) but it is conducted by all state institutions directly involved in recruiting and gathering support for the regime. Consequently, the regime has survived the heterogeneity of Syrian society and opposition by building its opposite—a cohesive unitary regime. The resultant coalition made it difficult for any actor to attempt a coup against any other without risking its own survival—which explains why the “Egyptian scenario” was not practicable during the past 18 months of Syrian unrest. This also explains why no other state institution has attempted to take over the presidency to resolve the crisis.

Another important institutional element in regime cohesion has been the unquestioned support for the regime from the coercive apparatus and the ruling inner circle, a highly sectarian institution controlled and represented by the Assad clan. The military and security services have highly trained and loyal units such as the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division whose leaders had been care-

fully selected and placed under the command of officers who belonged to the president's family and clans such as the Makhloufs and Shaleeshs.⁷ All key posts in the military and security services are currently controlled by closely related families. For instance, the president's brother, Maher, commands the Republican Guard, a six-brigade elite force that protects the regime from domestic threats and heads the fourth armed division, one of the best equipped and highly trained forces. Before he was killed by a bomb in July 2012, the president's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, was the commander of Syria's intelligence agency, and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian military.

In the past decade, as the Ba'ath Party became less of a vehicle for mass mobilization and the 'representation' of its traditional constituencies, and as power was concentrated in Bashar al-Assad's inner core, the regime increasingly relied on the security services as an instrument of state control. Presently, as the majority of defecting soldiers are Sunni, more and more Alawites are forced in and the elite army units act as regime militias against the whole population and defecting soldiers. Fearing reprisals should the government fall, these militias see their fate as being bound up with the regime's survival. Therefore, the regime would only fall with the disintegration of these elite army units and not just the overthrow of the head of the state. Yet, as an institutionalized state disintegrates as a political entity, the ruling elites are less able to respond to pressures or make political compromises to end the violence.

2. The construction of a cohesive and loyal business class

Building a cohesive business class/sector was another important pillar of regime resilience. Through selective liberalization, an influential business class became totally dependent on its relationship with state officials to get benefits and privileged contracts. The erosion of populist policies and the declining role of the public sector were replaced by major economic reforms when Bashar, who inherited the presidency from his father in 2000, ushered in his so-called "Socialist Market Economy" in 2005 at the Ba'ath party's 10th Regional Command Conference.

A newly empowered mafia-like pro-regime alliance of capitalists and bureaucrats became the main beneficiaries of the public sector's networks of patronage. These

new social climbers have become the target of animosity within the less privileged classes in a country where extravagant displays of wealth were unknown in recent memory.⁸ Although the regime steadily shed the most important components of its legitimacy—collective ideology and egalitarian policies—it did not attempt to match economic liberalization with political reform.

Families and clans tied to the regime have become major economic actors. For instance, Rami Makhoul, the president's cousin, has a virtual monopoly over mobile phone services, the running of the duty free markets on Syria's borders, the top private English language school, sole representation of Schindler elevators, various restaurant chains and the oil sector. Others, who enjoyed similar privileges, include the son of Mustafa Tlas, sons of 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the son of Bahjat Sulaiman (the head of Internal Security until June 2005), the Shalishes (cousins of the president), other immediate members of the Assad family and members of the extended clan.⁹

Thus, networks of patronage were narrowed down to influential families rather than party members. It is no wonder then that Rami Makhoul, who became the symbol of corruption and impunity, was the focus of the protest movement in its early stage which forced the regime to state that Makhoul had quit business and channeled his wealth into charity and development projects. The loss of allegiance from the rural and working classes was offset by an increase of the security services in state institutions and popular organizations, heightening open repression to keep the civil-society threat at bay. As long as the security architecture holds, alternative power centers cannot merge, clientelism fragments key societal groups, discontent is unorganized, and social demands can be dealt with selectively.¹⁰ In addition to keeping those with proven loyalty in their posts, the regime's coalition with selected members of the rich urban bourgeoisie, the Sunni Damascene in particular, gave the latter a direct interest in the preservation of stability and their relations with the regime as long as their businesses continued to prosper.¹¹

Bassam Haddad explains how the regime's selective liberalization created a cohesive business class linked to it. He identifies four levels of state bourgeoisie that dominate and control the state economy and extend their patronage networks into

the public and private sectors. The first and most powerful segment of the state economic elite is mainly drawn from the regime's top leaders who are united by their direct relations with the ruling family. Although these individuals control public sectors such as oil, they increasingly derive their wealth from their relatively recent entry into various lucrative private sector markets, including those of communication, information technology, car dealerships and the free market zones that were liberalized and expanded in 2003.

The second most powerful level of state bourgeoisie is drawn from the army and security services. This category includes top generals and heads of the nine major security apparatuses, their deputies, loyal underlings, and former heads of security. These individuals have been able to convert their coercive power, and in some cases, their institutional positions, into significant wealth. Most of the offspring of these individuals have opted for private careers since the mid- to late 1990s. They form a significant familial power and financial bloc among the state bourgeoisie and it has become difficult to separate between the public and the private sector.

The third category, made up of the administrative and bureaucratic sectors, includes several hundred top civil servants, cabinet members and their deputies, provincial governors and high-profile mayors, and heads of labor and peasant unions. These people have been steadily moving into the private sector. The fourth category is the public economic sector whose civil servants moved into the private sector. Former and current high-level economic public sector managers and bureaucrats have been the most successful in making this move and competing effectively with ties to the core elite.¹²

In short, the public sector has been transformed into a cohesive private sector sheltered by the regime which cannot survive without the protection of state apparatuses. The lack of non-regime-related alternative avenues of business relationships ensured dependency and loyalty. Finally, the regime's policy of avoiding commercial linkages with international capitalism, via the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, for example, confined the business class linkages to the regime and state officials. This alliance seems to have endured during the current uprising,

as Damascus and Aleppo were largely immune to the unrest until the Free Syrian Army moved its battle to urban cities.

3. Institutionalizing fear and violence

To understand the current violence in Syria, one has to think about the nature of state violence against the population in the four preceding decades. Violence has been an essential tool of Ba‘thist rule mainly under the Assad family. Since the ascendance of the Ba‘th party in 1963, Syria has been under emergency rule which suspends all rights and liberties. How Assad maintained his rule may be illustrated by two examples of the violence his regime deployed—the Hama massacre of 1982 and the existence of “incommunicado” detention centers and military prisons where torture, ill treatment and dehumanizing conditions are widespread.¹³

Everyone in Syria, regardless of sect or race, activist or Islamist, is in danger of physical disappearance once he/she utters anything in opposition to the political or ideological orientation of the Ba‘thist regime or even to discuss the freedom of expression. As it were, a permanent state of war exists between the regime and the opposition. That is why the current violence between them is a continuation of a state of war that existed beneath the “stability and peace” of the last four decades of Assad’s repressive rule. The regime’s response to the uprising and the demands of the people since March last year displays the same mentality that caused the regime to crush opposition to its rule in Hama in 1982 by totally destroying the city and massacring its population.

A similar scenario looms, but this time it involves larger and more geographically dispersed segments of the population. Under the Assad regime’s “peace and stability,” hundreds of thousands were tortured and kept in detention centers and thousands “disappeared” before the 2011 uprising. With that the regime set the rules of its power relations vis-à-vis the Syrian population and practically destroyed any prospect for the emergence of political society in Syria. By institutionalizing violence the regime polarized the people between those wholly loyal and totally submissive, and the opposition. In other words, the Arab Spring may have been the trigger for the current uprising, but even more so it could have been the regime’s torturing and killing of children who wrote graffiti against the Assad rule on the wall of their

school. The spark of the uprising was this humiliation which exposed a four-decade process of dehumanizing the population.

Concluding Remarks

As with the other movements of the Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising began peacefully and remained so for more than four months. But the Syrian regime took two lessons from the uprisings elsewhere. The regime considered that, first, the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes were too slow in confronting the protestors, and second, the peaceful nature of the protest movements gained great momentum, delegitimized the use of force against them, and thereby attracted millions of participants. To that extent, the Syrian regime regarded the peaceful character of its domestic uprising to be most dangerous because it channeled new blood and force, even among those who had very little to do with politics, into a newly emerging political society. Drawing strength from its peacefulness and legitimate demands against corruption and authoritarianism, the uprising attracted people from all sects and classes of Syria's heterogenous society and spread to a larger geographical setting. Some of the protestors' best remembered slogans were "One, one, one; the Syrian people are one" and "peaceful, peaceful... even if they (security forces) killed one hundred of us every day!"

The security forces lost their patience with a peaceful protest movement that threatened to delegitimize the use of force against the people. In order to discredit the uprising and legitimize its use of force, the regime used two tactics. First, it raised the specter of sectarianism in official propaganda highlighting armed gangs, salafi militants and foreign conspiracies and spread rumors of sectarian attacks among various communities in villages and cities. Second, the regime militarized the uprising through the use of excessive violence in order to legitimize large-scale military operations and discourage the opposition from joining the protest movement. By doing so, the regime was able to push part of the protest into the field that the regime is most familiar with: military confrontation. As a result of the militarization, the regime made its own survival the only guarantee of the stability of the region for outside actors.

The protracted stalemate also invited regional mobilization. Regional actors started to exercise their financial and military influence in Syria by supporting various armed groups in pursuit of their own interests. Consequently, the Syrian problem became a regional one and the Assad regime ceased to be seen as the only cause of the instability in the region. This situation further neutralized the uprising's initial demands while regional and international support was channeled to armed groups on the ground. The escalation of violence had worsened the humanitarian crisis in Syria and the neighboring countries. By now, more than 40,000 people have been killed, hundreds of thousands injured, more than 40,000 people disappeared, and millions displaced, creating hundreds of thousands of refugees. Daily the state infrastructure is damaged and villages and cities are destroyed. As a result of the militarization of the Syrian crisis, the opposing forces, domestically, regionally and internationally, will hardly be interested in the language of smooth and peaceful political transition that would help stabilize the country in the years to come.

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



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