

Authoritarian Upgrading and the Arab Uprising: Syria in Comparative Perspective

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This paper looks at authoritarian upgrading (AU) in the light of the Syrian case. While AU is to an extent discredited by its failure to anticipate the uprising, in fact the literature on post-populist authoritarianism in MENA, of which it is a part, did identify the seeds of rebellion. Moreover, the AU literature can sensitize us to variations in factors making for rebellion: the situation in regimes like Egypt, well advanced on its pro-Western post-populist tangent, appear at first sight, quite different than those in Syria, which ostensibly had taken a somewhat different AU strategy applied, also, in a different societal and regional context. Syria was, nevertheless not spared the Uprising, but it has taken a very different tangent than in Egypt and other cases. AU can also give us clues to these differences.

The Dilemma of Populist Authoritarianism

The issue needs firstly to be located in the context of state formation in the Uprising states. Why have Arab republics, compared to monarchies, proved so vulnerable to the Arab Uprising? This is because they all do share something, namely, that they built their power and legitimacy on a distinctive different formula and that formula has collapsed. These regimes consolidated themselves by incorporating support through a combination of nationalism (anti-imperialism) in foreign policy, curbing the weak agrarian capitalist oligarchy through nationalizations and land reform, and a populist social contract. Enjoying neither electoral nor traditional legitimacy, legitimacy in these populist authoritarian (PA) regimes was contingent on a nationalist foreign policy and delivery of jobs and welfare. Because, however, the PA states could not sustain capital accumulation, they all faced the need to revitalize the private sector and encourage investment; this, however, required they privilege investors and abandon the populist social contract and also, to achieve integration into the world capitalist economy, also abandon anti-imperialism. This imperative could only be escaped or delayed if regimes had access to rent, from oil or aid and alternative Eastern markets. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the main sources of aid/rent were in the West, which required forfeiting nationalist legitimacy by foreign policy alignment Westward and peace with Israel, although Gulf oil states and Iran were potentially alternative sources. The only way out of these dilemmas was some kind of *post-populist* authoritarian upgrading.

Seeds of the Arab Uprising: Post-Populist Authoritarian Upgrading

The literature on AU, though having exaggerated the stability of authoritarian regimes did accurately identify the seeds of the uprising, even though it framed them in terms of their positive contribution to authoritarian upgrading. Across the region projects to “upgrade” authoritarianism took very similar forms, amply documented in the literature. The underlying deep change was a movement from an originally populist form of authoritarianism to “post-populist” or neo-liberal versions.¹ Authoritarian power was now used to pursue economic liberalization and ruling elites used pressures for privatization from international financial institutions to appropriate public sector assets for themselves, to enrich presidential families and ministers and private investors allied with them in “networks of privilege”²

How was this transition managed without incurring rebellion by those who lost out—public sector workers, land reform peasants, the poor? Authoritarian persistence cannot be

¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, “Liberalization without Democratization in ‘Post-populist’ Authoritarian States: Evidence from Syria and Egypt,” in Nils Butenschon, Uri Davis and Manuel Hassassian, *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, (2000); Martha Pripstein-Posusney *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions and Economic Restructuring*, (1979); Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma Murphy, “The Transformation of the Corporatist State in the Middle East,” *Third World Quarterly* 17, 4], (1996); Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, *The Arab State and*

² Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York: Palgrave: Macmillan, 2004).

explained by coercion alone and indeed, the logic of authoritarian rule is to *include* some social forces in order to *exclude* others; if post-populism refers to the *strategic* shift in the political economy of regimes, the exclusion of regimes' former populist constituencies, authoritarian upgrading denotes the *tactical* techniques by which regimes tried to manage this transition without destabilizing their rule. Heydemann, et.al. and King showed how ruling elites used privatization as a source of patronage to build new bases of support substituting for the old populist coalition. The parallel literature on hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism stressed how limited political liberalization facilitated authoritarian persistence.³ Glasser showed how regimes fostered pro-regime parties supportive of neo-liberalism.⁴ Lust-Okar and Kassem showed how regimes learned to divide and rule by selectively including and excluding political groups from participation in semi-competitive elections while King showed how dominant ruling parties maintained the corporatist networks first established under populism but now to dis-empower and demobilize rather than mobilize workers and peasants. Heydemann's idea of "Authoritarian upgrading" particularly denoted the *techniques* by which such post-populist regimes tried to compensate for the risks of abandoning their mass constituencies by tapped new resources from investors, diversifying their constituencies (to the business class and the ulama), deployed co-optation and divide and rule strategies, and offloading welfare responsibilities to private forces and civil society, while re-regulated state-society relations so as to keep control over these newly empowered forces outwith the regime's institutions.⁵

The seeds of rebellion are to be found in this transition. On the one hand, post-populist transition, although meant to "fix" certain vulnerabilities in *populist* versions of authoritarianism generated powerful mass grievances; on the other hand, authoritarian upgrading, although meant to contain and compensate for these negative side effects had also their own negative side effects. It is now apparent that every enhancement from AU of authoritarian resilience also had cumulative costs, which, indeed, contained the identifiable seeds of the Arab Uprising.

However, even if all the republics have, to one degree or another followed this tangent, variations in their societies and their particular populist and post-populist formulas, made for different levels of vulnerability to uprising and help explain the different tangents uprisings have taken, most importantly, difference between those where discredited presidents quickly departed (Tunisia, Egypt) but regimes remained intact and those where leaders remained highly resistant to removal and protracted conflict, sliding into civil war, resulted (Libya, Yemen, Syria). What explains such variations? I hypothesize that two broad master variables, each of which has sub-components, explains these variations: 1) level of grievance and 2) the opportunity structure for rebellion, which is determined by the relative power balance between state and society. Where grievances are high and the opportunity structure shifts to society, mass mobilization can be rapid and effective and presidents are quickly ousted (Egypt, Tunisia). Where grievances are low and the opportunity structure is low, because the state-society balance favours the regime, there should be no Uprising (Algeria?). In mixed cases, Uprisings have taken the form of protracted conflict, with extended stalemates between regime and opposition. Table 1⁶ scores Egypt, Libya and Syria on the explanatory variables. On the face of it, the lower levels of grievances and opportunity structure (higher regime capacity) in Syria constituted less favourable conditions for the uprising and also less favourable conditions for its rapid success.

³ Ellen Lust-Okar, 'Divided they rule: The management and manipulation of political opposition,' *Comparative Politics*, 36:2, 2004; Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule* (2004).

⁴ Bradley Louis Glasser, *Economic Development and Political Reform: The Impact of External Capital on the Middle East* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2001).

⁵ Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World: Analysis Paper No. 13* (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007).

⁶ The factors and scoring in the table are inspired by an article by Bassam Haddad which examined the prospects that the Uprising would spread to Syria: "Why Syria is not next—so far," 9 March 2011, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/844/why-syria-is-not-next-.-.-so-far_with-arabic-translation-

Table 1: The Ingredients of Uprising

I. Grievances: High grievances = higher vulnerability to Uprising	Egypt	Libya	Syria
1. Extent of leadership de-legitimation; from either excessive tenure, corruption or engineering of dynastic succession	High	High	Medium
2. Extent of regime nationalist de-legitimation: from alignment with the US, separate peace with Israel	High	Medium	Low
3. Extent of neoliberal restructuring: degree of structural adjustment, privatization, hollowing out of public services, reduction of labour protections, tax cuts and incentives for investors, etc.	High	Medium	Medium
4. Extent of ruling family aggrandizement: degree of concentration of wealth and opportunities in the presidential family at the expense of other elites.	High	High	High
5. Extent of crony capitalist wealth concentration, mass impoverishment: extent of increased inequality and poverty, conspicuous enrichment of new bourgeoisies.	High	Medium	Medium
II. Opportunity Structure: high regime capacity = low opportunity structure for anti-regime movements			
1. Regime cohesion (vs. elite factionalism, readiness to abandon the president)	Medium	Low	High
2. Strength and reliability of security forces (vs. extent of institutional autonomy of the armed forces from the president, hence interests distinct from the presidency/regime inner circle)	Medium	Low	High
3. Infrastructural penetration of society: extent of bureaucratic or party penetration of the periphery, ability to deliver services and maintain surveillance (vs. inability to penetrate and control the peripheries).	Medium	Low	Medium
4. Immunity to foreign influence (vs. foreign dependency, potentially constraining tactics of security forces).	Low	High	High
5. Extent of authoritarian upgrading: extent to which regimes are able to co-opt new constituencies with resources, such as bourgeoisies, or divide and rule them (oppositions, ulama) to prevent combining against it.	High	Low	Medium
6. Extent of civil society atomization/ demobilization potential vs. civil society with enough density and autonomy to give people associative experience beyond primordial solidarities).	Low	High	Low
7. Low IT penetration (vs. high penetration)	High	Low	Medium
Fragmented society, obstructing mass mobilization vs. homogeneous society facilitating it.	Low	Medium	High

Conditions for the uprising, in retrospect, appear to have been best in Egypt (rather less so in Tunisia) because grievances were high but the opportunity structure was shifting toward society. Why high grievances? Egypt and Tunisia were the poster children of the IMF, the purposed success cases of neo-liberal reform. As authoritarian republics, their legitimacy had rested on populism and nationalism but they had gradually exhausted this. Neo-liberal policies, led to big socio-economic inequalities, excluding former populist constituencies. Among the

consequence of these so called reforms were two tendencies: attacks on the living standard of the poor and state employed middle class under the label of structural adjustment: through reduction of food subsidies, end to state employment, hollowing out of public education and health; redundancies and end to traditional labour rights in industry; in Egypt the end of the Nasserite agrarian relations law made a million peasants homeless. At the same time, enrichment of ruling elites, especially the presidential family, had become notorious; for example, privatization involved selling public companies at below market prices to a small group of crony capitalists—often friends of Mubarak and involved in Gamal Mubarak’s policies committee within the ruling National Democratic Party--the biggest business oligarchs in the country. By 2000, 138 state-owned enterprises had been sold for less than \$8 billion, with many purchases made by unsupported, never repaid, loans from state owned banks. Public monopolies were thereby transformed into private ones. At the same time, subsidies and job security were cut for ordinary people and the tax burden shifted from the rich to the middle class. This was exacerbated by foreign policy submission to the US: loss of nationalist legitimacy from collaboration with the West in various respects war on terrorism, attack on Iraq, culminating in Mubarak’s collaboration with US and Israel against Palestinians in Gaza. For a decade chronic pro-democracy and pro-Palestinian protests by the middle class and worker and peasant protests over privatization and land dispossession and were on-going, expressive of profound mass disillusionment with the regime but also a relatively high associative capacity in civil society. At the same time, the rather homogeneous settled societies in Egypt and Tunisia posed few communal obstacles to collective action, allowed mobilization on class grounds and neither president had stacked the army with tribally recruited loyalists as was common in more tribal or communally divided societies.

Initially, few thought the Uprising would spread to Syria because the level of grievances appeared comparatively lower. Bashar al-Assad himself famously told the *Financial Times* that Syria was not Egypt because his foreign policy was congruent with public opinion. The regime had pursued a nationalist foreign policy meant to win legitimacy and its stand during the Iraq war in particular, but also over Lebanon, and its support for Hezbollah and Hamas in their confrontations with Israel (in striking contrast to Mubarak’s perceived collaboration with Israel against them) had won Bashar al-Asad considerable domestic support, with regional polls showing him to be quite popular compared to other Arab leaders. Moreover, the regime had delivered stability, sparing Syria the sectarian chaos in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, the showcases of American-imposed democratization, which seemed to allow the regime to discredit the West’s democracy discourses. Compared to Egypt, Syria’s neo-liberalism was recent and mass impoverishment was much shallower. According to Syria watchers such as Carsten Wieland,⁷ Syria went into the crisis with advantages lacking elsewhere. Unlike his overthrown counterparts, elderly and in power for decades, Bashar was young and had only been in power for a decade, still enjoying the benefit of the doubt and widely seen as preferable to alternatives in the regime. In significant ways, Bashar al-Asad had pursued a special and distinctive version of authoritarian upgrading that appeared to position him favourably after his first decade in power.

The opportunity structure also appeared lower in Syria. In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, the army and the security forces were tightly interlocked with the Alawi political elite and controlled by Asad kin and fellow sectarians and could not be readily separated from the regime; they were also far stronger and more cohesive than e.g. Qaddafi’s forces in Libya. Sectarian and regional fragmentation was expected to deter class mobilization by the deprived against the regime. According to Haddad, compared to Libya, the regime in Syria still had links to society especially to the business class that Bashar had cultivated, and the ulama that the regime also had worked assiduously to co-opt, thereby seemingly neutralizing these traditional centres of opposition to the Ba’th; on the other hand, he argued that Egypt’s larger public space and more developed civil society, opposition parties and press, that had prepared the ground for collective

⁷ Carsten Wieland, ‘Syria: a tale of missed opportunity,’ *OpenDemocracy*, 4 October 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/carsten-wieland/syria-tale-of-missed-opportunity>

action, had no parallels in Syria's more repressive political climate and underdeveloped civil society. Moreover, unlike Egypt's homogeneous society, Syria's multiple communal cleavages seemed formidable obstacles to mass mobilization against the regime.

In summary, it appears from the balance of grievance and opportunity in 2010 that spread of the Uprising in Syria was not inevitable. So what went wrong?

Populist Vulnerabilities in Syria

When we look closer at Syria's version of authoritarian upgrading, we find that despite certain differences, there were also definite similarities that both allowed the regime to "fix" vulnerabilities inherited from the populist era and also generated new vulnerabilities. Ba'thist populism's special vulnerability was dominance of the regime by Alawi officers in a Sunni-majority society; this was initially overcome by nationalization and land reform, which broke the dominance of the Sunni oligarchy and gave the regime the means to win over popular constituencies, notably Sunni peasants. Stability, however was only achieved when Hafiz al-Asad concentrated power in a Presidential monarchy, which nevertheless shared power with a cross-sectarian elite, rested on party and bureaucratic institutions which incorporated a cross-sectarian rural constituency and was endowed by nationalist legitimacy from the 1973 war and the on-going struggle with Israel.

However, the public sector failed as an engine of capital accumulation because it was used to provide populist benefits such as jobs and subsidized food and patronage for the regime constituency. Alienated private capital fled the country or refrained from investment except in quick profit tertiary sectors. This national security state, overdeveloped relative to its economic base, generated a permanent fiscal deficit that could only be sustained by external 'rent.' Hafiz al-Asad was, however, able to use a nationalist foreign policy that gained both domestic legitimacy and, as a front line state with Israel, aid from the Arab Gulf states and cheap arms from the Soviet Union.

The cumulative economic vulnerabilities of the system were, however, exposed by the economic slump of the late 1980s which was met by an austerity policy that starved the public sector, froze social benefits and slashed the earning power of the state-employed middle class; a new investment law was promulgated to entice private and foreign investment to supplement the declining public sector; together these measures revived the private sector, thus appeasing the bourgeoisie, parts of which were incorporated into the regime support base; the regime was thus starting on a post-populist tangent but it did not wholly renege on the social contract and continued, for example, to provide subsidized bread and agricultural inputs. In parallel with the fall of Syria's Soviet patron, external aid declined and the Ba'th's nationalist tangent now collided with the imperative to access inward investment as a substitute for aid. This contradiction was buffered by revenues from Syria's own modest oil reserves, but these were also expected to decline in the 2000s; in the meantime, Syria pursued, under US auspices, the possibility of a peace settlement that would satisfy nationalist legitimacy yet open the door to foreign aid and investment.

Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria

According to Volker Perthes, Bashar al-Asad's project was to "modernize authoritarianism."⁸ Regime survival required preserving the fiscal base of the state, hence reforming the economy by a move toward the market, and integration into the global world of the internet, cell phones, etc.; but economic reform required consolidating the power of reformers within the regime and adapting Syria's nationalist foreign policy and its populist social contract to the requisites of capitalism without de-stabilizing the regime. Upgraded post-populist evolution proceeded on three parallel planes; 1) reform was ultimately driven by the

⁸ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Papers (London: Oxford University Press for IISS, 2004).

twin survival needs of the regime: for revenues, via economic reform, driving a post-populist change in its social base, while yet trying to preserve nationalist legitimacy. 2) the president's struggle to concentrate power against the resistance of the party/old guard his reforms; 3) the regime's drive to control the political arena as it changed its social base. Bashar initially appeared to deftly manage this balancing act, but in the end it proved beyond him.

Balancing fiscal and legitimacy needs:

There was a certain contradiction between revenue needs and nationalist legitimacy. The two had gone together under Hafiz and might have continued to do so had a honourable peace with Israel (return of the Golan, Palestinian state) been reached which opened Syria to an influx of investment. However, the failure of the peace process, led Syria to shift to a foreign policy of resistance (opposing the invasion of Iraq, the determination to maintain Lebanon as a sphere of influence, the alignment with Iran closed off this avenue of reform. The regime used resistance to the US in Iraq and to Israel and Western efforts to dislodge it from Lebanon to generate nationalist legitimacy, but the consequent isolation from the West, notably over the Hariri murder, had economic costs. US-imposed sanctions, aiming to economically isolate Syria, discouraged Western investment and caused difficulties for the financial services and telecommunications industries by which the regime sought to propel the globalization of the Syrian economy.

This drove regime efforts to find alternative sources of revenues, made especially urgent by the gradual decline in Syria's oil exports as production stagnated and domestic consumption soared, attempted through pre-Iraq war oil deals with Saddam Hussein, which antagonized Washington and were cut off after the US invasion. To counter isolation from the West, trade was switched toward Asia and Turkey while tax cuts, much reduced import tariffs, currency liberalization and creation of a stock market and private banks were designed to attract expatriate capital and surplus liquidity from the Gulf. In fact, investment inflows drove a boom in trade, housing, banking, construction, and tourism, steadily increasing the proportion of GDP generated in the private sector and solidified the support of new capitalist classes. *However, the drive to evade isolation and access resources meant that the ideal of a social market economy was side-lined* and the policy pursued by Bashar's reforming technocrats headed by Abdullah Dardari was little distinguishable from neo-liberalism with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution. Economic liberalization removed former limits on corruption and the managers of the new banks and businesses earned high salaries, while taxation became regressive as income taxes reductions were compensated for by cuts in the subsidies that kept low income citizens from falling into extreme poverty. Public education and services were run down and parallel private ones for the rich sprang up, halting social mobility. Agriculture was neglected and despoiled by drought, which exacerbated a housing crisis originating in the population boom and the increase in real estates prices from the influx of Gulf money. The conspicuous consumption by the new crony capitalists and their foreign partners alienated the regime's original rural constituency and the end to tariff protection devastated small manufacturers in the suburbs. The need to trim a state overdeveloped on declining external rents and to foster the private sector and inward investment required a restructuring of the regime's social base away from its initial populist alliance; as such these changes were perhaps inevitable, but the need to evade Western campaign of isolation meant they had to be artificially accelerated and produce quick results hence that many unbalanced concessions were given to investors, in e.g. lowering taxes and tariffs, notably from the Gulf and Turkey.

Concentrating power in the Presidential Clan

Parallel to this move to post-populism, Asad sought to make the regime politically compatible with its changed socio-economic policy. The neo-patrimonial inheritance of leadership father to son appeared to succeed without legitimacy loss as Bashar was perceived as a reformer and appealed particularly by youth. However, this alienated key regime barons, such

as Khaddam, the long serving Vice-President. Bashar had to share power with the “old guard” entrenched in the party who were wary of his project. He tried to concentrate power in the presidency in an extended struggle with an old guard, using his powers of office to retire the elder generation; inserting his loyalists in the army and security forces; inserting reforming technocrats into government in a tug-of-war with the party leadership over appointments; Asad also engineered an attrition in Ba’th party leadership and cadres that culminated in the 2005 10th Syrian Party Congress when the old guard was swept from power. In uprooting these barons, Asad reduced obstacles to his reforms but also weakened powerful interests with clientele networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. This shrunk the scope of elites incorporated into the regime, making the President over-dependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons and technocrats lacking bases of support. His dependence on the Asad-Makhlouf family clan resulted in an over-concentration of patronage, opportunities and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients; the narrowing of loyalties from party to family core is a dangerous move for authoritarian regimes but one that was common across the region and a key grievance driving the Uprising. Asad, also seeing the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, starved them of funds and attacked their patronage powers. This debilitated the regime’s organized connection to its constituency and its penetration of neighbourhoods and villages. The gap was partly filled by the security services, which, however, were underpaid, corrupt and lax. While citizens would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access, increasingly they approached tribal, sectarian or religious notables.

Authoritarian Upgrading in the Political Arena

Parallel to this, the political arena had to be managed in this transition. A main technique of authoritarian upgrading was the fostering of alternative constituencies that could be balanced against each other. The regime co-opted a new alliance of reforming technocrats and the business class, a powerful social force which, dependent on the state for opportunities (contracts, licenses) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism. The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations, such as junior chambers of commerce, a certain political decompression. Critics of the regime were treated more leniently, even encouraged to voice constructive criticism, albeit within redlines highlighted by episodic instances of selective repression. This was meant to provide a safety valve for discontent. Bashar al-Asad continued the strategy of fostering moderate Islam as a counter to both radical Islamists and the secular opposition, resulting in the spread of Islamic schools and charities, conservative attire, and mosque attendance. Islamist intellectuals and businessmen were co-opted into parliament and the ulama were permitted to manage the Islamic financial institutions allowed by the regime to attract Gulf money. Bashar also made a concerted effort to build alliances with the interlocked business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo. In parallel, efforts were made to off-load welfare responsibilities from the state and party to private charities.

Authoritarian upgrading chiefly took the form of co-optation, divide and rule and selective political decompression but did not otherwise parallel social changes, as the regime neglected to co-opt the moderate opposition by ending the emergency law’s severe restrictions on political freedoms and permitting party pluralisation and competitive elections to parliament; it also failed to foster a bourgeois party to incorporate the winners of economic liberalization, yet in parallel, debilitated the Ba’th party’s penetration of society, hence its ability to control and co-opt those gaining less or losing under the new order. In summary, authoritarian upgrading’s lag behind post-populist change meant the regime had not sufficiently cultivated new constituencies to compensate for its old populist support base.

The Uprising:

As Bassam Haddad had anticipated just before the Uprising, the one thing that could spread it to Syria was an over-reaction by the security forces, and this happened—in Dera. In the early days of the crisis, effective leadership from the president could still have made a difference, particularly had Asad reacted with democratic concessions instead of repression. However, his March 30, 2011 speech on the beginnings of the protests, in which he deprecated popular grievances, disillusioned the many who wanted him to use the crisis to advance reform. One explanation for his failure to better manage the crisis could be that he had simply lost touch with the pulse of society. Preoccupied with foreign policy he was possibly become complacent owing to his success in countering external threats, and therefore neglected the domestic vulnerabilities of his regime. Further, in the words of the International Crisis Group, the new generation of the ruling elite, ‘having inherited power rather than fought for it, grown up in Damascus, mingled with and mimicked the ways of the urban upper class’ had lost touch with its social roots.⁹

Given the minority core of the regime, however, it may be Asad simply could not afford to make sufficient democratic concessions, especially with the debilitation of its former cross-sectarian base. Had Bashar chosen to lead the reform process, he might have actually won a free election to another presidential term; but this had become a family regime, and the rest of the clan could well be losers under democratization, especially the highly unpopular tycoon Rami Makhlouf and Maher al-Asad whose violent overreaction re-elected the tribal mentality and minority complex of some Alawis in the regime. However, the brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrators allowed what were localized protests demanding reform to spiral into a major uprising calling for overthrow of the regime.

The Uprising took particular forms, both similar and different from those in other Uprising States, but the main difference from Egypt and Tunisia is the protracted nature of the conflict, issuing in a stalemate in which neither can defeat the other, with foreign intervention alone likely to shift the balance against the regime. We hypothesize that this is because there were enough grievances to fuel an uprising but only among a plurality of the population, with much of the rest of the population adhering to the regime as a better alternative than civil war, and the majority on the sidelines. This helps explain the regime’s ability to sustain its cohesion and retain control of the main cities, Damascus and Aleppo. At the same time, the opportunity structure was relatively balanced between regime and opposition, giving none a decisive advantage.

There were many similarities with other Uprisings. One was the key role of disenfranchised youth, the unemployed protestors outside the centres of prosperity. The urban middle class intellectuals that had mounted the Damascus Declaration tried to reactivate their networks, but they lacked popular bases and the initiative fell, as elsewhere to informal youth networks. Diaspora activists, played a pivotal role, using IT to generate opposition networks, deliver their message to the public and outside world (with the aim the latter would bring pressure to constrain anti-protestor repression).

Different from Egypt but somewhat similar to Libya, the Uprising was geographically concentrated outside the capital, beginning in the rural peripheries, then spreading to small towns, suburbs, and medium sized cities. Medium and small sized traders and manufacturers, victims of trade liberalization and also resentful of the expansion of the Alawis from their domination of the military into business appear to have been a main anti-regime force in the smaller urban centres. The Uprising took a distinctly Sunni Islamic character. The ulama outside the main cities were likely to be anti-regime; also in certain Damascus suburbs, Saudi and Muslim Brotherhood connected elements actively mobilized protestors while in towns such as Dera the clergy became openly revolutionary. The main occasion for mobilization became Friday prayers, with resistance committees springing up around mosques, for example the Omari mosque in Dera which was an early headquarters of protest, with their imams, natural leaders of

⁹ International Crisis Group, ‘The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution,’ Brussels and Damascus, 6 July 2011.

their neighbourhood, sometimes taking the lead. The identity of the protestors was Sunni Islamic and they felt empowered by the rising influence of Sunni movements across the region and by funding from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood in exile.

Indeed, the uprising has from the beginning had a sectarian dimension, inevitable given the Alawi dominance of the regime, that only increased over time. Initial centres of grievances were mixed areas where Alawis and Sunni lived together as in Latakia and Banias. The uprising then spread to Hama and Deir az-Zur, traditional bastions of Sunni piety resentful of the regime. The most persistent centre of rebellion was religiously-mixed Homs where sectarian conflict added further fuel to the flames. Tribes also played a role; the decline of the security forces control of them thorough subsidies and exemptions and its replacement by Saudi money was important in the regimes loss of control over the tribal periphery. There had been similar grievance among Sunnis in the early 1980s, but rebellion then was much more localized, so what had changed? In 1982, the Sunni village, still incorporated into the regime, sided with the regime against the urban-based Muslim Brotherhood; however, in the 2000s, the party/peasant union infrastructure was debilitated, rural service declined, and agriculture neglected and devastated by years of drought. Symptomatic of this was that it was Dera, formerly a base of the Ba'th, where the Uprising began; there the loss of work opportunities in Lebanon, corruption and drought had encouraged salafism among unemployed youth; then tribal reaction against the arrest of tribal youth and the extreme overreaction of the security forces. Debilitation of regime connections to the mass public, whether the ruling party or the corporatist structures (trade unions, peasant unions) had developed in a way similar to the other cases, but was especially dangerous in Syria if one considers how crucial this infrastructure was to allowing a minority-dominated Ba'th regime to consolidate its power in the first place.

The social base on which the regime relied to survive comprised the crony capitalists, urban government employees and the minorities, especially Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians who, not suffering from the restrictions on public religiosity and church building typical elsewhere, were rallied by exploiting their fear of salafi Islam. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where the investment boom, the takeoff of tourism and the new consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising, although their suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. The regime was able to mobilize significant counter-demonstrations in these cities. The middle class of the two main cities originally saw Bashar as a reformer and while they were disillusioned by his repression of the protestors they preferred a peaceful democratization and feared instability and loss of their secular modern life style if traditional rural or salafi insurgents took power. Overt rebellion by ulama in the periphery did not spread to the main cities where the senior ulama were concentrated, as many had been co-opted and they took advantage of the uprising to win new concessions from the regime rather than abandoning it. The cooptation of the bourgeoisie on the regime side was similar to Egypt, although not Libya. But aggrandizement of the presidential family weakened its potential class support for the regime's neo-liberal tangent. Indeed, exiled businessmen who had lost out to aggrandizement by regime-connected operators were big funders of the insurgency. But much of the in-country business class saw no alternative to the regime and initially hoped it would end the disorder although, as it failed to do so, some began to see its removal as the only way out.¹⁰

A main difference from all other Uprising cases and what the opposition had hoped to provoke, a split in the regime or army, had not happened was that the regime and army remained loyal and did not split. What the opposition had eleven months into the revolt. There were resignations from the Ba'th party, particularly in the Dera, as a reaction to the repression there. But the military remained largely cohesive and loyal. This contrasts sharply with the early refusal of the military in Tunisia and Egypt to defend the regime against protestors. Alawi dominated units, such as the 4th division; headed by Maher al-Asad and the Republican Guard, seen as the most loyal, were most involved in repression. Alawis were mobilized in thuggish

¹⁰ Hassan Abbas, 'The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria,' *Arab Reform Brief*, 51, October, 2011, p 9.

militias (the *shabiha*) and recruited into the military reserves; with much to lose if the regime fell, they remained its most reliable shock troops. While there were increased defections, as many as 10,000 from a 200,000 man army, some hundreds of which formed the core of armed resistance to the government, this was nothing on the scale of the split in Libya and Yemen. Moreover, as the army generally became implicated in the repression—with protestors starting to denounce it—its stake in regime survival increased. Finally, far less dependent on Western patrons than Egypt, the regime was less vulnerable to outside pressure to restrain its security operations.

The External Factor

While the uprising is essentially indigenous, external forces increasingly seek to use it to their advantage. Qatar, once an ally, used Al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising from the outset, while the Saudis funnelled money and arms to the tribes and, with the US, smuggled into the country sophisticated mobile phones (reputedly provided by an Emirati prince) that bypassed Syrian networks.¹¹ In November, Qatar and Saudi Arabia took the initiative in prompting the Arab League into unprecedented moves to isolate Syria, aimed, together with European sanctions, at drying up the regime's access to economic resources and breaking its coalition with the business class. A UN General Assembly vote condemning the repression (122 in favour, 13 against and 41 abstentions, including China and Russia) showed the depth of the regime's international isolation. The main effect of these moves may be psychological: convincing the silent majority that the regime cannot survive and that the best outcome would be its quick replacement. An anti-Asad coalition, led by France, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, with the US in the background, and with the collaboration of lesser actors such as the Hariri faction in Lebanon and the new Libyan regime, has recently begun financing, training, arming and infiltrating insurgents into the country.¹² The Asad regime's only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold lies with its links to Hezbollah in the west and, in the east, Iran and Iraq. It has increasingly relied on Iran, whose Revolutionary Guard assisted it with electronic warfare and which urged Iraq to provide Syria with cheap oil and to stay out of the anti-Asad coalition. Meanwhile Russia and China, antagonized by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya, albeit under increasing western pressure, have so far protected Syria from a similar scenario.

Conclusion:

By comparison to Egypt, Syria appeared less vulnerable to the Arab Uprising. In Egypt, with neo-liberalism and crony capitalism well advanced, the regime lacking in nationalist legitimacy and the president and his son and heir-apparent equally unpopular, grievances were high while the opportunity structure, by comparison to Syria, was also high. Syrians obviously shared the similar grievances with Egyptians, but they appeared to be less intense and generalized, with neo-liberalism and impoverishment less advanced and many winners of the regime strategy concentrated in the main cities. The opportunity structure for Uprising was also less favourable, given greater regime cohesion and a more fragmented, less autonomous civil society. Nevertheless, regime mismanagement of protests turned them into a widespread uprising. Nevertheless, the unevenness of the Uprising and the cohesion of the regime made for a situation of protracted conflict in which neither side could readily prevail. Hence, in some respects, the external factor has become the most important factor, as in Libya, in determining the outcome; but by contrast to Libya this factor was not solely favourable to the opposition.

¹¹ Nick Ottens, 'Saudi Arabia forging a new Sunni state?', 24 Aug. 2011, <http://atlanticsentinel.com/2011/08/saudi-arabia-forging-a-new-sunni-state/>, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

¹² Tahir Mustafa, 'Saudi king turns pro-reform activist, but only for Syria', <http://www.crescent-online.net/component/content/article/3156-saudi-king-turns-pro-reform-activist-but-only-for-syria.html>, accessed 05/01/2012; Kurt Nimmo, 'Evidence of U.S. effort to arm Syrian opposition emerges', 12 Aug. 2011, <http://landdestroyer.blogspot.com/2011/08/evidence-of-us-effort-to-arm-syrian.html>, accessed 4 Jan. 2012; 'France training rebels to fight Syria', <http://truthfrequencynews.com/?p=22375>, 26 Nov. 2011, accessed 4 Jan. 2012.

