"State of Barbary" (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria

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Unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings in 2011, the Syrian Revolution has endured for more than three years. The uprising burst from the "peripheries" of the regime into an organized national movement, clinging at the beginning to the ideal of a nonviolent, nonsectarian upheaval aiming at a democratic Syria. Yet, the dynamics of contention between the regime and social movements have been reshaped, leading to a return of violence with the risks of sectarian civil war looming.

Before 2011, the Syrian regime appeared to be relatively immune to internal challenges. Even after Tunisia and Egypt's uprisings, many observers shared the view that the Syrian regime would be spared because of its "unique" characteristics. Bashar al-Asad was described as a benevolent dictator, and credited with some modernization in the Syrian system. He was also said to be a representative of the new generation (*al-jil al-jadid*) of Arab leaders in their forties, although he had already inherited power from his father in 2000. Finally, the unique strategic posture of Syria was considered a source of resilience for the regime.[1] These assertions proved false. The Syrian opposition was very weak organizationally, after decades of authoritarian repression. Nonetheless, the number of Syrians demonstrating in public spaces inflated quickly after March 2011. Ultimately, Syria's foreign policy did not make the Syrian regime immune from protests. Hence, the Syrian case did not prove exceptional and was engulfed in the wave of the Arab Spring's regime-shaking protests.

The massive character of the uprising calls for a return to social movement theory (SMT) to better understand the outbreak of protests. The study of contentious politics in SMT highlights three crucial factors: the set of opportunities that movements can seize upon; the set of organizational structures that movements revolve around, and the way in which the goals and objects of collective action are framed. This set of opportunities was located on the "peripheries" of the Syrian system that had become alienated as a consequence of the process of modernization under Bashar al-Asad. Syrians' deep sense of rage was exacerbated by the harsh reactions of the regime. Increasingly efficient organizational structures and adequate framing turned peaceful demonstrations into a na-

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1. Even President Asad was deluding himself when he stated that "Syria is stable" because he was "very closely linked to the beliefs of its people" with his enduring Arabist credentials, in contrast to Egypt's Husni Mubarak; "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.

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tional movement with an insurrectionist character, with massive demonstrations in public spaces that were countered by the deployment of security forces. Yet, these essential factors display an overly structuralist view, offering a rigid understanding of contexts. Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing have also been dynamically created and appropriated in a context of stalemate, between a regime keeping some coherence in repression and a society maintaining its diversity in protests, quite differently from the short Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings (respectively 27 and 18 days). The dynamics of contention have been reshaped in Syria by the violence first utilized by the regime, its "war effort" to crush protests by all means, and the trap of an all-out sectarian conflict, leading to a militarization of the uprising veering towards full-scale civil war.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES: REVOLT IN THE "PERIPHERIES" OF THE SYRIAN SYSTEM

Protests began on March 18, 2011, in the dusty agricultural town of Dar'a near the border with Jordan, over the arrest of 15 young schoolchildren who were brutally tortured for scrawling graffiti that read "the people want the overthrow of the regime" (*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*), a slogan they had learned from watching coverage of the Egyptian uprising on Al Jazeera. When adults protested for the release of their children and mobilized along tribal networks,[2] demonstrations quickly swelled and spun out of control as thousands joined.

From Socioeconomic to Political "Peripheries"

The Syrian popular uprising has its origins on the country's peripheries, a term that can be understood in two senses: geographical and political. Geographically, the uprising was initiated in rural peripheries, in small and medium sized cities such as Dar'a, Banyas, Latakia, Duma, etc., but also in the popular quarters of Homs, Hama, and Damascus, which became the forefront of protests.[3] The countryside and the urban landscape, directly linked by recent rural in-migration, were ready to explode in protests in 2011. Dar'a is a marginalized city which derives its income from agricultural production, border trade with Jordan, and migration to Lebanon; and all these sources of revenue were damaged in the 2000s due to an agricultural crisis, a new rapid highway circumventing the town, and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005. Furthermore, a severe drought in the Syrian countryside after 2003/4 affected Syria's vital wheat crop, forcing the country to import its staple grain and causing the migration of 1.2–1.5 million people from the countryside to large cities, which was exacerbated by the large waves of Iraqi refugees fleeing civil war

2. Tribal power structures were used in Dar'a to secure the release of the arrested students, with Dar'a notables presenting demands to local security authorities, who responded with disdain. For more about the Dar'a incident, see, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian Mourners Call for Revolt, Forces Fire Tear Gas," Reuters, March 19, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/19/us-syria-idUSTRE72I22020110319; and Reinoud Leenders, "Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar'a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria's Popular Uprising," *Mobilization*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 419–34.

3. Fabrice Balanche, "*Géographie de la Révolte Syrienne*" ["Geography of the Syrian Uprising"], *Outre Terre*, No. 29 (November 2011), pp. 437–58.

after 2003. In the 2000s, people in search of better infrastructure flooded small cities in the Hawran region and western cities such as Latakia, Idlib, Homs, and Hama. The new migrant populations overstretched cities' and towns' social and economic absorption capabilities, creating pockets of poverty and exclusion and leaving cities overwhelmed by "rurbans," urbanized rural people with no roots in the urban landscape, and often lacking occupational skills.[4] The town of Duma, a center of small manufacturing north of Damascus, has been marginalized by the harmful effects of economic liberalization, which contrasts with the capital's extravagant development in the hands of a small "nobility" of new entrepreneurs with links to the Asad regime. In Damascus, the neighborhoods of Kafr Susa, Shaghur, and Bab Saruja have incorporated migrants from Hawran and have been at the forefront of protests. Unrest began in Homs in the sprawling suburbs that had absorbed rural migrants or displaced people from the northeastern region and in Baba 'Amru, a restive neighborhood.

The Syrian uprising does not solely reflect socioeconomic polarization between rural or informal neighborhoods and big cities such as Damascus or Aleppo. It was also sparked by mounting anger due to political reasons that carried the seeds of a profound malaise.[5] Politically, rural peripheries acted as representative of, while simultaneously joining hands with, a larger constituency of the "peripheries of the regime." Those on the regime's peripheries include the have-nots, those who have not benefited from access (*wasta*) to the networks of power or access to various privileges, from rich entrepreneurs close to the regime to the working poor with jobs in the state bureaucracy. A typical feature of authoritarian rule, the regime's exclusive grip on the levers of power and distributional capabilities biased towards its social base and clients has encountered dramatic changes in recent years.

In the 2000s, Bashar al-Asad set out to modernize the Syrian political system after inheriting power from his father, but within limits, known in Syria as "redlines" (*al-khutut al-hamra'*).[6] In reality, Bashar al-Asad's modernization created a new and wider chasm between those close to the regime ("surfing" on the wave of modernization, often as new private entrepreneurs) and the majority of the population, especially young people, who were left behind. As the Syrian economy "modernized" and the investment,

4. See, Heba El Laithy and Khalid Abu Ismail, *Poverty in Syria, 1996–2004: Diagnosis and Pro-Poor Policy Considerations* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2005), http://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/PovertInSyriaEnglishVersion.pdf; a more recent report was issued in 2010 but not officially published, se,, interview by the author with UNDP officials working in Syria, May 2010, Damascus; see also, Shahrzad Mohtadi, "Climate Change and the Syrian Uprising", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 16, 2012, http://thebulletin.org/climate-change-and-syrian-uprising.

5. A small incident in the Hamidiyya Market in the Damascus Old City on February 18, 2011 is symptomatic: a traffic policeman reprimanding the son of a merchant provoked a gathering in this very conservative and politically quietist/cautious neighborhood displaying an unprecedented mobilization and civic response. For more, see, Hassan Abbas, "The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria", Arab Reform Initiative: Arab Reform Briefs, No. 51, October 2011 (http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB_51_Syria_Oct_2011_H-Abbas_En.pdf).

6. Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Caroline Donati, *L'Exception Syrienne: Entre Modernisation et Résistance* [The Syrian Exception: Between Modernization and Resistance] (Paris: La Découverte, 2009); and Philippe Droz-Vincent, *Moyen-Orient: Pouvoirs Autoritaires, Sociétés Bloquées* [Middle East: Authoritarian Powers, Stalled Societies] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

tourism, banking, agro-industrial, and retail sectors all saw booms, crony capitalism produced devastating economic gaps in society. Due to the lack of resources, in addition to declining foreign aid flows from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, and Gulf countries in the 2000s, there has been a latent retreat of the Syrian state with a wide gap in social expectations between a rich minority close to the regime and the great majority of the population that has suffered and has seen its own situation deteriorate with the end of state-centered development and redistribution. State patronage has been replaced with a more free-market "social market economy" where public provision remains important, but salaries, jobs, pensions, and other indicators have severely deteriorated. The large crowds of the 2011 Syrian uprising were full of the young and unemployed living in suburbs with little stake in the status quo. In rural Hawran, the protest movement has crossed socioeconomic lines; with engineers, doctors, and young, tech-savvy, university-educated urbanites coalescing into a broad, popular revolt. The political "peripheries" refer not only to those classes at the margins of society, but to all those marginalized by the Asad regime and its reforms, from affluent groups without connections to the regime, to large middle classes falling behind in the social ladder. Many constituencies converged in the "Syrian Revolution 2011" movement, gathering members from a larger range of groups across Syrian society, and not just the few (however courageous) urbanized intellectuals and upper middle class intellectuals who led the short "Damascus Spring" in June 2000. Such social processes and linkages have distinguished the "Syrian Revolution 2011" from the previous Islamist-led uprising of 1975–82.

Furthermore, the 2011 Syrian Revolution has threatened crucial power mechanisms of the Asad regime: because the rural periphery was an essential pillar of the regime and its alignment with protests with urban peripheries was a reversal of the classic pattern of the Syrian regime in the 1960s. Many cadres of the Ba'th Party hailed from the rural periphery[7] and, after 1963, the Ba'thist state heavily relied on the promotion of peasants and sons of the provincial petty bourgeoisie in the military, the ruling party, and the state apparatus to stabilize its power.[8] Quite differently, under Bashar, in the context of modernization reforms, the regime has distanced itself from its rural base. This was best symbolized by the new generation of rulers in power who had grown up in Damascus and mingled with the Damascene upper class (and its conspicuous consumption style) in a manner quite different from the austere, military culture of the Ba'thist elite under Hafiz al-Asad. The sons of what had been the social backbone of the Ba'thist regime, young generations and rural Sunnis in Dar'a, Rastan, and Dayr al-Zawr, etc., felt alienated and rose up against the regime in 2011.

7. The agricultural plain of the Hawran is the birthplace of Vice President Faruq al-Shara', Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal al-Miqdad, and the former head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon Rustum Ghazala; Rastan, near Homs, is the home of Mustafa Talas; Tall, a village close to Damascus, is home of 'Abdullah al-Ahmar. See, Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

8. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*; Alasdair Drysdale, "The Syrian Political Elite, 1966–1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol, 17, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 3–30; and Alasdair Drysdale, "The Regional Equalization of Health Care and Education in Syria since the Ba'thi Revolution," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (February 1981), pp. 93–111.

The Inabilities of Authoritarian Rule: Repression and Sectarianism

Opportunity and threat (repression) combine to shape conflict. During the first months of the uprising, the Asad regime reacted with a mixture of surprise, incompetence in addressing popular grievances, violent overreaction, and self-confidence that it could deal with the protest movement.[9] The security solution was the preferred choice for the Asad regime, regardless of its new faces at the top and its new dynamics of modernization. Hafiz al-Asad's "state of Barbary," as analyzed by Michel Seurat in the 1980s,[10] was in abeyance, disguising the true nature of a repressive and sectarian system of power based on an 'Alawi *'asabiyya* (group solidarity);[11] but this regime was revealed by its reactions to protests in March 2011. Initially, the Asad regime tried to restore its ability to govern and sought to maintain some form of normality in public life: "a normal life" under the dreaded shadow of security services. Authoritarian regimes endure by instilling a sense of normality into their day-to-day rule. In the first six months of the uprising, the regime mobilized mass demonstrations in favor of Bashar al-Asad (*masirat al-minhubbakjiyya*, literally, "the demonstrations of 'those loving you,'" i.e., Asad) in big cities. The goal was to show that large parts of Syrian society preferred stability (*istiqrar*) to the risks of political transition.[12] The regime also claimed to support the supposed "silent majority," a very controversial term: In authoritarian settings, hypocrisy is commonplace, as some citizens display external signs of support for the regime out of sycophancy, fear, or personal interest. Many others do not dare express criticism and keep silent. Yet, the actual conduct of the regime had precluded even a semblance of "normalization" between 2011 and 2012.

The main features of the Asad regime in the 2000s were reforms (most visible for foreigners) alongside enduring repressive rule (most tangible for ordinary Syrians). Though seemingly contradictory, the two contrasting features actually represented two sides of the same coin. Repression entailed an enduring securitization and brutalization of public life through various forms, from the insidious bullying and extortion by civil servants or lay policemen, to the day-to-day predation by local administration and security services, to the fear of repression for those refusing tacit allegiance (in public spaces, as the regime cared less about the private sphere), to open repression that has remained

9. Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). On the conclusion by insiders in the Syrian system that they would have to crush protests instantly rather than face enduring protests as in Tunisia and Egypt; see Abbas, "The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria."

10. Michel Seurat, *L'Etat de Barbarie* [The State of Barbary] (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

11. The terms *'asabiyya* comes from Ibn Khaldun's 14th century classic *Muqaddima*, see, Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967). For a contemporary rereading of the term, see, Seurat, The State of Barbary; Ghassan Salamé, "'Strong' and 'Weak' States: A Qualified Return to the *Muqaddimah*," in Ghassan Salamé, ed., *The Foundations of the Arab State, Vol. 1: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2002), pp. 205–40; and Olivier Carré, "*A Propos de Vues Néo-Khaldouniennes sur Quelques Systèmes Politiques Arabes Actuels*" ["Regarding Neo-Khaludinian Views on Some Current Arab Political Systems"], *Arabica*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1988), pp. 368–87.

12. Later on, the regime came to fear a Romanian scenario, in which a large crowd assembled in December 1989 to praise Nicolae Ceaușescu began to boo him, announcing the end of the regime (along with an internal coup d'état by insiders from the security services). Interviews by the author with former high-level Syrian officials, November 2011, Paris.

active against opponents even in the 2000s under Bashar al-Asad, and to the continuing repression of the "emergency laws."[13] Security services, such as the dreaded *mukhabarat*, or secret police, have played an essential role in the Syrian polity: they do not just exert a classic function of political repression as their name would imply, but they are essential to numerous administrative steps in daily life (for instance, buying land, building a house or a factory, or obtaining a business license, etc.).[14] Other state institutions such as parliament, municipal councils, the bureaucracy, and the Ba'th Party are largely void shell institutions that have been replaced or circumvented by the repressive and predatory grip of the security services that have taken on the tasks of the state apparatus.

Repression has thus been a key ingredient of the Asad regime's response to the 2011 uprising. For the regime, the political solution (reforms within "redlines") was defined as part of the security solution, along with repression.[15] In the first months of the uprising, the security apparatus was engaged in summary-style executions of soldiers or officers who disobeyed orders to open fire on peaceful demonstrators.[16] In order to intimidate dissidents, the regime has engaged in targeted killings of members of Local Coordination Committees (*Lijan al-Tansiq al-Mahalliyya*), sniper shootings to terrorize demonstrators, and general intimidation tactics to deter people from going on to the streets, including by attacking symbolic targets.[17] The regime has tried to reinstate what is called in Syria "the wall of fear" to prevent citizens from protesting in public spaces. Yet, the ruthless repression exerted by the security forces actually had the opposite effect and has prompted more popular reactions against the regime.[18]

13. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), *Ten Years in Al-Assad's Grip: Country Report on the Human Rights Situation in Syria during the Past Decade* (Cairo: CIHRS, 2010).

14. Protesters often denounce these localized grievences, as exemplified by demands aired on the social networking website Facebook, denouncing, for instance, in the Hawran the plundering of water and other resources in collusion with officials, an aggravating factor in times of drought and economic crisis.

15. This was outlined in an interview with Asad in August 2011, see, "*Al-Asad: Al-Mukhattat Kan Yuhdaf ila Isqat Suriyya Tamaman*" ["Asad: The Plan Was Intended for Syria to Collapse Completely"], Russia Today Arabic, August 21, 2011, YouTube video, posted by "RT Arabic," August 21, 2011, 42:17, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=345qwLmQY4k.

16. In official media, disobedient soldiers were numbered as martyrs (*shuhada'*), reported as having been killed by armed opposition groups. This explains the fact that at the beginning of the Syrian uprising, victims were being reported among the security forces even though demonstrations were overwhelmingly peaceful. See, Nicholas Blanford, "Syria's Military Shows Signs of Division Amid Crackdown," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 25, 2011, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0425/Syria-s-military-shows-signs-of-division-amid-crackdown; Syrian Arab Republic, Department of General Intelligence, "Detailed Plan for the Bracing," March 23, 2011, leaked by Damascus Center for Human Rights, available in translation on the MSNBC website, http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/Syria_document.pdf.

17. Such symbolic killings include the popular singer Ibrahim Qashush, known for his spirited songs that energized thousands of people in Hama, whose throat and tongue were cut out, see, Anthony Shadid, "Lyrical Message for Syrian Leader: 'Come on Bashar, Leave,'" *New York Times*, July 21, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/22/world/middleeast/22poet.html. Another symbolic action was the abduction of caricaturist 'Ali Farzat, whose fingers were smashed, see, Nada Bakri, "Political Cartoonist Whose Work Skewered Assad Is Brutally Beaten in Syria," *New York Times*, August 25, 2011. These attacks represent clear and focused signals addressed to societal protests, and are read as such in Syrian society.

18. "*Muthaqqifun Suriyyun Yaksirun Jidar al-Khawf: Laysa li-l-Nizam Ta'ifa . . . Innahu bi-Jidd Dhatahu Ta'ifa*" ["Syrian Intellectuals Break the Wall of Fear: The Regime Does Not Have a Sect . . . It Is Really A Sect Itself"], *All4Syria*, May 6, 2011, http://all4syria.info/Archive/7193.

The Asad regime has not relied on the whole Syrian army, but mainly on elite units, including the Fourth Armored Division, the Third Corps, and the Republican Guard. These units are highly trained, highly equipped and better staffed with carefully selected (and usually, 'Alawi) officers. In comparison to Tunisia or Egypt, the Syrian military (or at least its strategic/elite parts) is much closer or more "organic" to the regime and has no "autonomous" (from the regime) organizational coherence. For more than 40 years, the regime has carried out "social engineering" inside the officers' corps to ensure that 'Alawi officers linked or indebted to the president are placed in command of the most strategic units, meaning those stationed near big cities.[19] The chain of command has been based on a network of kinship and trust more than formal experience. As a result, security forces and elite army units have answered the president's call to repress mass demonstrations. Secondly, the regime has also relied on the manipulation of the Syrian society's sectarian diversity.[20] In response to the mounting crisis in the first half of 2011, the regime resorted to intimidations on the ground or via the media based on sectarian arguments.[21] Security services, overwhelmingly staffed with 'Alawis, have been involved in inciting sectarian incidents in towns in the Coastal Mountain Range (known popularly as the 'Alawi Mountains), in the religiously mixed countryside between Hama and Homs, or in Homs itself (the most religiously mixed city in Syria), spreading rumors that members of a given sect were planning to attack neighborhoods from another sect. The regime has relied on so-called *Shabbiha* groups, which consist of rogue thugs and smugglers turned paramilitaries, who are paid on a daily basis by state institutions or private security firms owned by former high security officials. Recruited mostly from the Coastal Mountain Range, the *Shabbiha* groups were first deployed in Latakia and Banyas, and thereafter in Homs and the suburbs of Damascus, spreading chaos in Sunni villages and mixed rural areas. While polarizing the population across sectarian lines by frightening people would inevitably divide the opposition, sectarian manipulations by the regime did not prevent the appearance of a large cross-national movement at the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

19. Officers above the rank of colonel are said to be mainly 'Alawis. In 2000, it was difficult to find Sunni officers in high commands other than the defense minister, Lieutenant General Mustafa Talas, according to an anecdote revealed by former vice president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam after his 2005 defection to Paris. Philippe Droz-Vincent, "A Return of Armies to the Forefront of Arab Politics?," Istituto Affari Internazionali Working Papers, No. 1121 (July 2011), http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiwp1121.pdf.

20. Bashar al-Asad has leveled the threat of *fitna*, a heavily charged Islamic term meaning the breaking of ranks in the Islamic community. The official news agency has reproduced sermons condemning *fitna* and declarations from Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan Buti and other prominent Sunni clerics; see, "*Al-Buti Yufti: al-Tazahurat fi Suriyya Batat Tu'addi ila 'Akhtar Anwa' al-Muharramat wa-Yajib al-Imtina'' 'Anha*" ["Buti Declares: Demonstrations in Syria Have Led to 'Dangerous Kinds of Forbidden Behavior' that 'Must Be Prevented'"], *Syria News Station*, June 25, 2011, http://sns.sy/sns/?path=news/read/36439; Syrian Arab News Agency, "*Al-Buti: al-Fitna allati Dabbarat li-Suriyya Masiraha al-Fashal wa-'ala al-Mugharrir bihim al-'Awda ila Jaddat al-Sawab wa-l-'Aql*" ["Buti: The Disorder that Was Set Up for Syria Is Destined to Fail, and Those Who Have Been Fooled Will Return to Their Senses"], January 13, 2012, http://sana.sy/ara/2/2012/01/13/394011.htm.

21. In March 2011, huge posters appeared in Syrian cities as part of a government public relations campaign, which featured a young girl wearing a headscarf (considered a symbol of Sunni Islam due to the increasing veiling among women in the 1990s and 2000s as a symbol of Sunni defiance towards the Asad regime, whereas 'Alawi girls remained unveiled) and the slogan "To those who want to know to which sect I belong . . . [I answer] my sect is Syrian." Such posters surreptitiously suggest that there are different sects in Syria that might divide the country.

The use and abuse of sectarianism has been a foundational feature of Asad family rule since November 1970. Historically, sectarianism was not one of the main fault lines in Syrian politics, divisions were based on geographic regions, the fragmentation of the political space between cities and countryside, between classes, and between rival "agro-cities."[22] Nonetheless, since the 1970s, sectarianism has instilled itself into political squabbles and in power rivalries. The Ba'th Party regime was historically based on a coalition of 'Alawis, rural Sunnis, and other minority groups. Beginning in the 1990s, the regime co-opted large merchants in Damascus and then Aleppo, and brought in newer elite groups, such as religious preachers, tribal elites, and media figures. The Asad regime favored its original rural social base, made up largely of 'Alawis and Sunnis, with social policies such as agrarian reform and privileged access to state positions. The regime marginalized influential constituencies, Sunni urban notables first among them. Bashar al-Asad's modernization reforms reshuffled the Syrian elite's closed circles; yet, the core of Syria's decision-makers has remained a tightly-knit group of 'Alawi security officials whose role has been continually reinforced since the Ba'th Party's Tenth Regional Congress in 2005.[23] The governing core of the Asad regime is concentrated in a few familial, tribal and sectarian networks. The most powerful (and most hated by the opposition) faces of the Asad regime are all 'Alawis. Though not wholly sectarian from top to bottom (i.e., it is the regime of some 'Alawis, those close to the Asad family, and not an 'Alawi regime), the Asad regime's policies carry a stamp of sectarianism and are perceived by many Syrians as sectarian-based, though hidden behind a veil of "modernization."

Syria is a country of various minorities and a larger Sunni majority.[24] Sectarian arguments, whether real or perceived, create divisions within a given society. Divisions in diverse societies are further pronounced when they overlap with class or power struggles, hence giving sectarian conflicts more salience and substance. The Asad regime has used sectarianism to buttress its power by building behind-the-scenes 'Alawi networks of power linked to the Asad family. The regime has also made its "natural" power base coalesce in times of crisis, and has perpetuated divisions based on sectarianism for the purpose of creating mechanisms of loyalty.[25] The Asad regime has presented itself as an incarnation of a Arab nationalist (*qawmi*) and Syrian patriotic (*watani*) state project that has been defined as "Asad's Syria" (*Suriya al-Asad*) in official media, in order to deny the existence of any groups, sects, regional differences, or ethnic identities besides the country's Syrian and Arab identity. The Asad regime might also be characterized as divisive: authoritarianism is a way to truncate a society, to divide it for fear that it might recreate some form of unity against the regime. An authoritarian regime rules by nesting together key constituencies and instilling in the rest (the "silent majority") the idea that the incumbent regime is going to endure. The Asad regime has sought tacit agreement with economic elites in the main cities where the investment boom was concentrated;

22. Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 26ff.

23. Élizabeth Picard, "*Syrie: La Coalition Autoritaire Fait de la Résistance*" ["Syria: The Authoritarian Colaition Due to the Resistance"], *Politique Etrangère*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 757–68.

24. Strictly sectarian analyses obscure the significant social differences among sects, for example, that between a Sunni peasant from the Hawran and a Sunni urbanite from Damascus.

25. Seurat, State of Barbary; and Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad the Ba'th Party* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

the quietism of religious elites ('ulama) valuing stability;[26] the fears of religious minorities (especially 'Alawis and Christians) of regime change (meaning Sunni majoritarian rule);[27] the Kurds' ambivalence winning concessions from the regime over citizenship and identity and not openly joining protests in 2011;[28] and the manipulation of tribal leaders.[29] Conversely, the opposition has striven since 2011 to unravel this system by rallying the business community, encouraging defections within the Syrian army, gaining approval among religious elites or symbolic figures, and offering an alternative national discourse of sectarian and class unity against the regime.

In 2011, the regime presented itself as the protector of religious and ethnic minorities, and more generally of the Syrian cultural mosaic, by displaying a unitary national (*watani*) cadre that connected minorities to the regime. For example, state media publicized the nomination of General Dawud Rajiha as defense minister in August 2011, becoming the first Christian to hold the post. Rajiha was killed in July 2012 by a bomb in a very secure building in the center of Damascus; a surreptitious way to associate Christians with the fate of the Asad regime. While Christians in high positions are depicted first as Syrian nationals in the regime's media outlets, their religious affiliation is systematically recalled at the same time. Official media outlets have also rehearsed daily sectarian incidents, especially against Christians. Furthermore, the media have recalled the gruesome story of Iraqi minorities during the fierce civil war in Iraq (2006–9) where many Iraqis settled as temporary refugees in Syria, giving ordinary Syrians a palatable sense of what civil war means.[30] Similarly, the Arab nationalist inclination displayed by the opposition's representatives (especially its external wing), along with concessions by the regime towards the moderate, autonomy-seeking wing of the Syrian Kurdish movement to entice them, has also deterred Kurds who are sympathetic to the uprising from fully aligning with it. The Asad regime has played on anxieties at a reversal in the complex equilibrium between communities in Syria (what is called in Syria *tahaluf al-aqilliyyat*, "the alliance of minorities,") to rally frightened members of minority communities. Many feared that what minorities had gained from the regime (often nothing more than a "protection" that could be quickly reversed) might disappear if the regime

26. In periphery regions, 'ulama have been more likely to be revolutionary, as exemplified by the 'Umari Mosque in Dar'a. Thomas Pierret, "*Syrie, l'Islam dans la Révolution*" ["Syria: Islam in the evolution"], *Politique Etrangère*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Winter 2011), pp. 879–91.

27. While the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy has closed ranks with the regime out of fear of a wave of Sunni fundamentalism, many Christians have signaled their solidarity with demonstrators and have helped them on the ground in numerous neighborhoods.

28. In April 2011, President Asad granted citizenship to 250,000 Kurds, formerly considered foreigners. Another 75,000, dubbed "the forgotten," remained unaccounted for. Kurds taking part in the opposition's demonstrations thereafter shouted slogans, such as "we demand not nationality, but liberty and democracy." Vice President Najah al-'Attar attended Newroz (Kurdish new year) festivities on March 21, 2011, a very new feature in Syria.

29. In November 2011, President Asad went to Raqqa for the Islamic holiday of 'Id al-Adha, where he met tribal elders and distributed 55 million Syrian Pounds through the local *mukhabarat*; "*55 Millions la Prière Même pour l'Aïd et Surtout en Syrie, C'est Cher . . .*" ["55 Million for Prayer, Even for 'Id and Especially for Syria, That's Expensive . . ."], http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/11/13/55-millions-la-priere-meme-pour-l'aid-et-surtout-en-syrie-c'est-cher/.

30. Mahir Sharaf al-Din, "*Surat al-Masihiyyin fi I'lan al-Nizam*" ["The Image of Christians in State Media"] *All4Syria*, November 6, 2012, http://all4syria.info/Archive/58500.

were toppled, as the opposition has not yet offered a credible plan for "the day after."

In such a context of manipulation, resentment and fear are prevalent. In March 2011, many 'Alawis — from rural villagers in the underdeveloped Coastal Mountain Range suffering from state retreat and significant hardship to intellectuals living in the city, engaged in cultural life and civil society — have been sympathetic to protests and resent their community being taken hostage by the regime.[31] Yet, with increased uncertainties about the future of the Asad regime in 2012, mounting sectarian incidents, and talk of Salafi and jihadi groups being on the rise in 2013, 'Alawis have developed an interest in the status quo, along with other minorities, under the hypothesis strongly suggested by the regime that they fare better under a minority Asad regime rather than a majoritarian (Sunni) regime.[32] Under Hafiz al-Asad, the Ba'th regime offered 'Alawis an opportunity to overcome a second-class status, though not necessarily to become wealthy. Many 'Alawis believe these social gains might be in jeopardy if the Asad regime were to collapse, especially those in high positions and the numerous 'Alawis who have settled in Damascus neighborhoods (often built on lands confiscated from Sunni urban landowners in the 1980s), including Mazza 86, Hayy al-Wurud, Sumiriyya, Wahid Tishrin, 'Ish al Warwar; and in Homs.[33]

Past violence has also nurtured sectarian fears. There is an implied threatening subtext behind the regime's propaganda based on a kind of "Hama syndrome." In early February 1982, at the height of a civil war between the Asad regime and an armed Islamist rebellion, the regime decided to make an example of the city of Hama, where the uprising was based: estimates put the death toll between 10,000 and 30,000 killed.[34] The Hama incident became symbolically important. The revolt against Ba'thist rule in the 1980s was geographically widespread and took place in numerous cities, but events occurred mainly in Sunni neighborhoods. As a result, the uprising was seen mainly as a Sunni revolt for basic demographic reasons, in addition to the Islamist armed groups' rhetoric; and, for the regime, the repression was billed as a clear warning to the Sunni urban majority. These views have become deeply ingrained in Syria, absent in daily encounters among Syrians, but, in times of crisis and renewed violence, these events and the constructed meanings around them have resurfaced. According to the Asad regime's rationale in 2011, the dreadful lesson of Hama might have acted as a deterrent for those not yet engaged in protests — civil war played a similar role in the 1990s in Algeria. Conversely, the memory of such events has grown among activists opposed to the Asad regime whose parents lived in the 1970s and 1980s, and has added to their resentment of a regime that is said to be wholly sectarian and oppressive.

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31. "*Les Alaouites Pris en Otage par le Régime Syrien*" ["The 'Alawis Are Taken Hostage by the Syrian Regime"], *Un Œil sur la Syrie* [An Eye on Syria] (blog), May 26, 2011, *Le Monde*, http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/05/26/les-alaouites-pris-en-otage-par-le-regime-syrien/.

32. "*Al-'Alawiyyin fi Hayy al-Mazza Jabal 86: Khawf min Mustaqbal Majhul*" ["The 'Alawis in the Mazza 86 Neighborhood: Fear of an Unknown Future"], *All4Syria*, January 13, 2013, http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/66111.

33. Many of those recruited to the *Shabbiha* after 2011 were from the numerous unemployed young men in the peripheral 'Alawi neighborhoods of Damascus whose fathers had come in the 1980s.

34. National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria, *Ma'asat Hama* [The Tragedy of Hama] (Frankfurt: Maktab al-'Alam li-l-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, 1984); Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

FROM PERIPHERY TO CENTER STAGE: THE UPRISING AS AN EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE FOR THE REGIME

The initial revolt of the peripheries was not the only determinant of the Syrian movement in 2011. An active and mobilized society has been able to stand up to the regime's increasingly harsh repression. Social movement theory (SMT) helps explain the gradual shift from scattered and marginal demonstrations to a national protest movement.

Changing Dynamics and Organizational Structures of a Society in Revolt

The Syrian movement has been able to maintain momentum in public spaces. On one hand, large demonstrations express a sense of belonging and sharpen group boundaries among various people, while also undermining fear that ordinary Syrians feel in the face of likely repression. Protesters have overcome their limited resources by taking advantage of strength in numbers, the physical assembly of large number of people into limited spaces, and through the ethical superiority of peaceful demonstrations. The sites and strategies of conflict are chosen by making use of the spatial routines of daily life. Mosques have served as gathering points for coordinating demonstrations, as they have been the center of protests since the 1960s in Syria.[35] Schools have become another frequent meeting site, as schoolchildren have also been very politicallyactive and can gather when coming out of school, which is difficult for the security services to monitor. Public funerals have turned into giant anti-regime demonstrations. Holding protests in various places simultaneously as a way to exhaust the security forces in their equally manifold deployments was copied from Egyptian activists. In central Damascus and Aleppo in 2011, protesters resorted to starting flash mobs. People living in rich neighborhoods with large avenues conducive to rapid police deployment demonstrated in lower-class or more informal quarters with their mazes of narrow streets. The grassroots style of protests has largely been a consequence of the concentration of protesters in certain neighborhoods, which has made them easy to reach by door-to-door mobilization.

On the other hand, social movements endure with an emotional socialization, playing on the power of ritual. Songs, slogans, plays, and artwork have been effective vehicles to rouse popular emotions, along with the replacement of highly emotive national symbols (the 1932 green-white-black tricolor flag, slightly different from the official one under Asad, was displayed by protesters in public spaces as a sign of defiance) and the symbolic desecration of sacred objects for the regime (tearing down of statues and posters of the Asads) have been able to sustain high levels of organization and effective mobilization. Syrian protesters have expressed their grievances with innovative and creative slogans,[36]

35. Mosques have been strictly controlled by the *mukhabarat*; but the proliferation of mosques in new neighborhoods in sprawling cities offered less constrained opportunities, where groups could anonymously mobilize people. Nonreligious young people have also gone to mosques because they are places where mobilization can proceed in an otherwise strictly controlled Syrian public space.

36. In the rural northern part of the country, the small town of Kafr Nabl has earned a large reputation for its spirited slogans; see "Kafranbel Syrian Revolution," Facebook group, created January 1, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/kafrev; and, "*Lijan al-Tansiq al-Mahalliyya fi Suriya*" ["Local Coordination Committees in Syria"], Facebook group, created 2011, https://www.facebook.com/LCCSy.

even in the Syrian countryside that remains open to and connected with the outside world. Key events relayed on the Internet highlight the significant and transformative potential of the movement (anger joined with hope will make mass mobilization effective) as well as the emotional payoffs that can be gained through judicious organization.[37] Tangible local victories in 2011, seen through the temporary retreating of the security forces from some major cities, proved the power of collective action to actual and potential demonstrators.

A loose, underground movement has been organized from below: Local Coordination Committees in each city and village have been pivotal in organizing demonstrations, coordinating, and standardizing the content of slogans and banners (giving common names to the Fridays on which mass demonstrations have been organized). The decentralized nature of the movement makes it harder for the regime to crack down on it, as it brings the possibility for more leaders to emerge after one is arrested.

Among the core tasks lies using information as a weapon. The regime has maintained tight control on electronic and print media in the country in order to suppress news coverage of marches. The state has also expelled foreign journalists and prevented Al Jazeera from broadcasting live coverage of demonstrations, as they had in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.[38] In response, the opposition has efficiently built its own rival communication networks, both inside and outside Syria.[39] On one hand, contentious politics have been associated with the mobilization of heightened emotions. Cell phone cameras have changed the rules of the game and given protesters a powerful weapon with which to fight, by posting content that is uploaded to social media websites like YouTube and covered live on Al Jazeera. Images of atrocities committed by security services have had a great impact on energizing protesters and inspiring people to continue to gather in public spaces, despite the growing possibility of injury or death.[40]

37. Modelled after "the Friday of Anger" (*Jum'at al-Ghadb*) in the Egyptian Revolution, examples of the names of Friday demonstrations across the country are carefully calibrated to fit with events on the ground: "Dignity" (*al-Karama*) (March 25, 2011), "Steadiness" (*al-Sumud*) (April 8, 2011), etc.

38. This has to be related to the appearance of numerous banners in demonstrations demanding the entry of international media and observers ("*nutalib bi-dukhul wasa'il al-i'lam al-duwali, nutalib bi-dukhul muraqibin duwaliyyin*") in March and April 2011.

39. Emma Lundgren-Jörum, "Discourses of a Revolution: Framing the Syrian Uprising," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol 3, No. 2 (January 2012), pp. 9–39.

40. When security forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators in March/April 2011, images of repression with people displaying horrible wounds fueled further demonstrations in cities throughout the country. Images of special forces beating detainees in Bayda' were damaging for the regime. The mutilated body of a young child, Hamza Khatib, became a symbol and an emblem to protesters, like Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia or Khalid Sa'id in Egypt. "*Sham: Qaryat al-Baydah* [sic]*; Ta'amul Quwwat al-Amn ma' al-Ahali, 2011-4-12*" ["Sham: Village of Baydah (sic); Security Forces' Interactions with Locals, April 4, 2011"], YouTube video, 1:14, Shaam News Network, al-Bayda', April 12, 2011, posted by Shaam News Network, April 14, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjZ-kcLjeUE; "Martyr Hamza Khatib + 18," YouTube video, 2:25, Syrian Free Press, posted by "souriaelna," May 31, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKmmj_cer5w; and "*Kulluna al-Shahid al-Tifl Hamza 'Ali al-Khatib*" ["We Are All the Child Martyr Hamza 'Ali al-Khatib"], Facebook group, created May 27, 2011, https://www.facebook.com/hamza.alshaheed. Gruesome stories and videos of wounded people arrested and transferred to military hospitals where they were tortured were aired by opponents on Facebook pages in 2012. Similarly, the images of the heavy and systematic repression against Homs in February 2012 provoked large demonstrations one week later in the Damascus neighborhood of Mazza 86, signaling the protest movement's first entry into the capital.

Activists, with a key role played by supporters in the growing Syrian diaspora, have been able to ferry out images and reports to news outlets, and to publicize protests to new audiences. With hundreds of mobile phones, modems, and laptops smuggled into Syria, "citizen journalism" has proliferated. By the second half of 2011, activists completely flipped the balance of narrative power between the regime and alternative media. The opposition has managed to bring direct and timely attention to the situation in Syria, quite differently from the 1980s when the Syrian regime managed to hide repression from the outside world for months. A fierce information war, veering towards propaganda, has been waged between protesters and the Asad regime, with the "Syrian Electronic Army" fighting protesters on their own terrain, the Internet. There has been a "scale shift" from local structures to elaborate coordination across regional and international advocacy networks. A social movement with a revolutionary bid to power is not just limited to "street politics," but also seeks the destruction of the regime's ability to govern, the breakdown or incapacitation of the repressive state, and the installment of parallel hierarchies mimicking (and aiming to supplant) the current state. The opposition inside Syria is no longer simply just a ragtag group of local committees, but it has created coordination committees (*hay'at tansiqiyya)* aimed at unraveling the regime and building a parallel shadow state, especially in the countryside.

On the other hand, "self-effacing leaders" within the country who have made a strategic choice to face harsh repression, as well as an ethical choice not to reproduce the Ba'thist model of the *ra'is* (literally, "president" or "chief," meaning here a charismatic leader leading a political movement) have been complemented with "self-aggrandizing leaders" in exile.[41] A number of opposition conferences have convened in Turkey. In October 2011, in Istanbul, the Syrian National Council (SNC), replicating the model of the Libyan Transition Council, was formed to link the opposition-in-exile to activists on the ground. The initial hopes that the SNC would unify the opposition were dashed by organizational and personal problems after Turkey, France, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar pushed for instant unification. The opposition has been crippled by divisions, but there has been gradual upgrading of a Syrian society in revolt. The opposition has remained mobilized with their ability to act as a "leaderless public" in public spaces and to cut their teeth in the process of building themselves as a viable opposition.

Framing:
A Sense of Political Rage Targeting the Regime in a Nonsectarian Movement

What began as scattered movements of protest fraught with despair took shape as a social movement, a collective challenge to elite authorities by some significant number of people with common purpose and solidarity, and opened the way to a revolutionary movement, a social movement advancing competing claims to the control of the state.

41. In February 2011, plans emanating from abroad with a Facebook page calling for "a Syrian day of anger" met only a modest response in Syria. Even as late as April 2011, exiled groups' calls for a boycott of Syriatel or counterdemonstrations on the Ba'th anniversary were not carried out.

Initially, in March 2011, few protesters called for the overthrow of the president; and instead they concentrated on reforms.[42] Protesters directed their wrath primarily at corrupt and brutal regime insiders, such as Rami Makhluf, the president's first cousin and a prominent symbol of the crony capitalism of the modernization reforms,[43] and Mahir al-Asad, the president's brother and commander of the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division. Protests evolved thereafter as the dissatisfied public blamed not just the "social market" economy's advances and the profiteers linked to the regime, but the Ba'th Party and the Asad regime itself. The slogans chanted at opposition protests became increasingly bold, until settling on the final message of toppling the regime (*isqat al-nizam*).

The "cognitive liberation" behind demonstrations is much deeper than a collection of demands and is coextensive with a sense among protesters that the regime is responsible for everyday problems. According to SMT, cognitive liberation entails a transformation of consciousness within a significant segment of the aggrieved population, but, of course, grievances do not, *ipso facto*, fuel protests.[44] Mundane grievances have become politicized and nationalized as Syrians have demonstrated for a new political order. Comments posted on Facebook by lots of jobless young people who have seen this movement as their moment. A widely shared belief, especially among those in their 20s, is that the Asad regime has denied them their dignity (*karama*), specifically a fair chance to participate in their own fate. This is the deep political meaning of the Syrian demonstrations in 2011. After Tunisia and Egypt's mass demonstrations, the transnational cycle of protests across the Arab world has played an inspirational role. Images of regime-toppling protests on Al Jazeera have instilled among Syrian demonstrators the feeling that they have a window of opportunity to have a say in the dynamics affecting their own life. If the Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, and Yemenis could accomplish this, Syrians could also change their own conditions. When people define their situation as unjust and subject to change through collective action via "injustice frames" that dramatize the illegitimacy of current social conditions and frame the Asad regime as personalizing injustice.[45]

The regime has euphemistically used the terms "the crisis" (*al-azma*) or "the events" (*al-ahdath*) in its own narrative, mirroring that of the opposition, who have used terms loaded with other meanings such as "the revolution" (*al-thawra*) or "the uprising" (*al-intifada*). The regime has depicted all mass protests as violent, led by Islamist-leaning criminals, and supported by foreign countries plotting against Syria. Syrian state television has broadcasted numerous alleged confessions of captured "terrorists" to support the

42. In March 2011, the first demands of protesters presented by local notables in Dar'a entailed the release of political prisoners, the dismantling of *mukhabarat* headquarters, the dismissal of the governor, a public trial for those responsible for killings, and the scrapping of regulations requiring permissions from the *mukhabarat* to buy and sell property. The regime could portray them as expressions of calls for speeding up reforms, see, Lina Ibrahim, "Syrians of Daraa, Baniyas Set Demands to End Protest, Watan Says," *Bloomberg News*, March 20, 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-20/syrians-of-daraa-baniyas-set-demands-to-end-protest-watan-says.html.

43. See the interview of Rami Makhluf that was heavily damaging for the regime, Anthony Shadid, "Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End,'" *New York Times*, May 10, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html.

44. Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

45. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, pp. 31ff.

government's narrative. In the first six months of the uprising, funerals of fallen members of security forces were widely covered on Syrian television channels. At some point, such reports must have to been considered detrimental to the morale of government forces, and images of dead armed rebels have been widely aired instead. The regime has also painted the uprising as driven by sectarian forces, by associating it with fundamentalist or Salafi groups (including al-Qa'ida). The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) television and websites have prominently displayed very gruesome and graphic pictures after chaotic car bombings in civilian-populated areas near military and security facilities.[46] Recurrent unidentified explosions have fueled a context of fear and indiscriminate violence,[47] with the regime presenting itself as the only bulwark against the threat of civil war.

Conversely, opposition activists have struggled to underline that the objective of the uprising concerns political and civil rights in Syria, not foreign alliances or ethno-religious grievances. By using terms used like Syria (*Suriya*), the Syrian people (*al-sha'b al-Suri*), and the Syrians (*al-Suriyyun*), protesters have tried to uproot all the symbols associating Syria with the Asad family from political discourse. Unified slogans have been used across the country as a means to nationalize the movement,[48] with people demonstrating across regions in solidarity with cities under siege (such as Dar'a, Hama, or Homs) and banners naming martyrs from other regions as their own in order to delocalize the conflict and give it national meaning. The Sunni/'Alawi sectarian dimension was very much at the forefront of the six-year confrontation (1976–82) between the Asad regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.[49] This was neither the case in 2011 nor even in 2012, as things began to change with increased militarization. Slogans like "Sunnis, Kurds, and 'Alawis, we want national unity" (*Sunni wa Kurdi wa 'Alawiyya, baddna wahda wataniyya*) have been widely repeated in demonstrations.[50] Additionally, the political wing of the opposi-

46. On December 23, 2011 and January 6, 2012 in Damascus, February 10 in Aleppo, March 3 in Dar'a, March 17 in Damascus, March 18 in Aleppo, April 27 in Damascus, and then on May 10/11, 2012 in Damascus and Aleppo.

47. See the doubts leveled about the regime's manipulations by writer Fu'ad Hamira, an 'Alawi, comment posted on November 6, 2012, in "*'Ilmaniyyun fi al-Thawra al-Suriyya*" ["Secularists in the Syrian Revolution"], Facebook group, created April 2, 2011, http://www.facebook.com/the.syrian.secular.rebels/posts/375698682514745; and by the ('Alawi) journalist Ma'n 'Aqil, "*Al-'Alawiyyun Yanzahun min Dimashq ila al-Sahil. Wa-Masdar: Washintun Tarfud Da'm al-Jaysh al-Hurr*" ["'Alawis Are Migrating from Damascus to the Coast. Source: Washington Is Refusing to Support the (Syrian) Free Army"], *al-Sharq,* November 9, 2012, http://www.alsharq.net.sa/lite-post?id=569592. The former was intimidated into silence, the latter left Syria.

48. Salwa Ismail " The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2011), pp. 538–49; and Shayna Silverstein, "Syria's Radical Dabka," *Middle East Report*, No. 263 (Summer 2012), pp. 33–37.

49. Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *MERIP Reports*, No. 110 (November/December 1982), pp. 12–20, 24.

50. Others were "no to sectarianism, one, one, the Syrian people is one" (*la li-l-ta'ifiyya, wahid, wahid, al-sha'b al-Suri wahid*), and "we are not (Muslim) Brothers, nor foreign agents, we are all Syria, whether Muslims, 'Alawis, Druze, or Christians" (*nahnu ma anna ikhwan wa-la ayadi kharijiyya, nahnu kulluna Suriya, Islam wa 'Alawiyya, Duruziyya wa-Masihiyya*). As such, demonstrators have named Fridays to include minority constituencies; e.g., May 20, 2011 was *Azadi* Friday (using the word for "freedom" in Kurdish); Friday, June 17, 2011 was Friday of the Martyr Sabh al-'Ali, an 'Alawi hero in revolt against the French Mandate; and April 22, 2011 was Holy Day ("*Yawm al-Muqaddas*") in homage to the Christian holiday of Easter.

tion has striven to discredit the regime's accusations of sectarianism by denouncing the familial nature of the Syrian regime, rather than its sectarian tilt, and alternatively offering an image of protests as driven by civic feelings displayed by various people coming from all components of the Syrian population as a way to circumvent the 'Alawi problem.[51]

As a corollary, because of the national character of the opposition movement, all concessions or dilatory measures taken by the regime (the approach taken by other Arab regimes shaken by the transnational wave of protests, i.e. Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Oman, Morocco, and Jordan) have floundered. The regime's false contrition, such as when the president's spokeswoman offered his condolences to the people of Dar'a and acknowledged their legitimate demands at the very time elite military units were beginning to crack down on the town, was met with incredulity. Notwithstanding the gravity of events, the president himself did not appear on Syrian television from the beginning of the uprising until March 30, 2011. It enraged many Syrians to watch Asad address parliament that day, appearing relaxed and confident, and being received by legislators shouting lavish slogans reminiscent of familiar propaganda, such as "God, Syria, Bashar, that's all" (*Allah, Suriya, Bashshar, wa-bass*). Measures to buy off protesters — pay raises for state employees, increases in subsidies, announcing job creation initiatives, higher prices for cotton producers, the waiving of farmers' debts, the lowering of consumer taxes, symbolically releasing all the recently arrested activists, publicly considering press and political reforms, lifting of the reviled Emergency Law in April 2011, and a new electoral law in August 2011 — were dismissed as stalling tactics by protesters. Timing and legitimacy are essential in politics: after ten years of Bashar al-Asad's rule and many unmet promises, much of the public did not have confidence in the regime. Bashar al-Asad's rule, from the brief Damascus Spring in 2000 until the Arab Spring of 2011, has been a history of truncated reforms and devastating blows to the expectations of many that were not expressed openly until March 2011.[52]

Contrary to the forecasts of many observers, the strategic posture of the Asad regime did not make Syria immune from the protests spreading across the region. Asad's opposition to the American invasion of Iraq, his support for Hamas and the hardline Palestinian position, and his backing Hizbullah and the Lebanese "resistance" (*al-muqawama*), did not prove to make his regime protest-proof. In fact, the last even became a popular grievance, symbolized in slogans like when protesters chanted "No to Iran, no to Hizbullah, we want a Muslim who fears God" (*La li-Iran, la li-Hizbullah, baddna Muslim yakhafu Allah*).[53] This represented the end of the classic modus operandi of the Syrian regime dating back to the 1980s, when the severely embattled Hafiz al-Asad relied on regional policy to stay in power and re-imposed a strong authoritarian straitjacket

51. Burhan Ghalioun has long made a difference between social sectarianism (equated with a kind of pluralism) and political sectarianism (a malign effect of elite competition for power). Burhan Ghalioun, "*Naqd Mafhum al-Ta'ifiyya*" ["A Critique of Understandings of Sectarianism"], *Al-Adab* (October–December 2006), pp. 82–87. See also Burhan Ghalioun on Al Jazeera, "*Bi-la Hudud*" ["Without Borders"], October 5, 2011

52. On this recent past, see, Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernization and the Limits of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Philippe Droz-Vincent, "*Syrie: La 'Nouvelle Génération' au Pouvoir*" ["Syria: The 'New Generation' in Power"], *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 173 (July–September 2001), pp. 14–38.

53. The catch phrase "fears God" (*yakhafu Allah*) is of common use in the context of marriage to mean a good husband or righteous man for the bride.

on Syrian society.[54] Again in 2005, as the Syrian regime was under pressure from the US in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon, which was reeling from the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (with France and the US in the Security Council forging a protective umbrella for Lebanese mass protests against Syrian troops' presence), Bashar al-Asad could delegitimize his internal opponents as agents of foreign powers. Asad could play on his regime's ability to offer stability in Syria, while a civil war was beginning in Iraq and as the Lebanese protests fractured into sectarian squabbles. This usual political recipe for the Syrian regime no longer held any clout in 2011 as crowds defiantly resisted the regime's repressive practices and demanded dignity (*karama*), liberty (*hurriyya*), and revolution (*thawra*) while shaping a nationwide protest movement.[55]

DYNAMICS OF CONTENTION: SOCIETY AGAINST THE STATE AND THE SHIFT TOWARD MILITARIZATION IN 2012

The relationship between the regime and the opposition is not static, but relational. The Asad regime has vacillated on numerous occasions, but has not given up. This is different from other cases in the Arab world, where regimes collapsed after the military dissociated from them. The military, as the ultimate coercive backbone of these regimes, refused to fully engage in repression against crowds in Tunisia and Egypt; it fractured in two in Yemen; it imploded in Libya.[56] Quite differently, the Syrian military (or at least key parts of it) has utilized repressive tactics with its full lethal might.[57] The Asad regime has displayed its resilience in 2012 and 2013; yet, its coercive resources have become overused, as seen by increased defections. Conversely, the cost to the civilian populations has been so great that it is doubtful that protesters will back down. The end result was a situation of "mutually hurting stalemate" in early 2012, where neither camp prevailed nor was crucially overwhelmed. This dreadful interplay has given a new trump card to the Asad regime to push the country towards war and to play on sectarian divisions.

The Trap of Violence and the Turn towards Militarization

Violence has been a very controversial topic among protesters in Syria. It was clear from the beginning that nonviolent demonstrations were a powerful means for a societal revolt against a brutal regime, with slogans like "peacefully, peacefully"

54. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990).

55. Symptomatically, Friday August 8, 2011 was dubbed by Local Coordination Committees as "Friday of No to Dialogue" (*Jum'at La li-l-Hiwar*), just two days before a visit by the US and French ambassadors to the besieged city of Hama.

56. Philippe Droz-Vincent, "The Military amidst Uprisings and Transitions in the Arab World," in Fawaz A. Gerges, ed., *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 180–208.

57. For more details on the regime's management of its military, see, Philippe Droz-Vincent, "The Syrian Military and the 2011 Uprising" (workshop presentation, Military Engagement in Mobilizing Societies, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany, November 7–9, 2013). The key according to the literature on transitions (from authoritarian rule) is splits within regimes: regimes let go of power because key constituencies, such as the armed forces, compel them to give up.

(*silmiyya, silmiyya*) giving it a powerful legitimacy to counter the regime's overwhelming superiority in resources. The protest movement would have degenerated into civil strife long ago had it not been for the desire among its local coordinators to keep it peaceful. In any protest movement, a minority always considers violence to be justified in order to achieve desirable political gains; but violence-inclined factions can be sidelined by the ability of leaders to prevent this inclination from gaining currency in the wider imagination by offering an organizing framework drawing on the opposition's legalistic discourse.

It took months and months for armed groups to emerge. Indeed, from the beginning, there were losses in the Syrian security forces due to self-defense, as has been reported by human rights organizations.[58] Civilian self-defense increased with the world's inaction towards the crisis in Syria after the summer 2011.[59] Retired military personnel joined self-defense units with young people who thought that demonstrations were too dangerous. Furthermore, military service is mandatory in Syria and many young Syrians have a military background and basic weapons training.[60] But it took a while for the uprising to become militarized and it was not foreordained that it would be dominated by a military logic.

Defections in the military increased in the second half of 2011, opening up a second phase of the uprising's militarization. Despite the sectarian bias in the armed forces and the security forces, the repressive crackdown displayed by the Asad regime should not be taken for granted. The prospect of massive killings of unarmed and peaceful civilians is always problematic for any army. That pitfall was avoided at the beginning of the uprising by the regime's deployment of elite units staffed exclusively by loyal 'Alawis. But the army became overstretched as a consequence of the regime's activation of more regular units to face the massive groundswell of protesters. Due to the country's demography, the bulk of the Syrian army is Sunni and mainly from rural areas, while the officers' corps is mainly stacked with 'Alawis. As violence grew with the use of the regular military in acts of repression, the potential for defection within the army rose (with declarations aired on the Internet).[61] This led to the birth to the Syrian Free Of-

58. Human Rights Watch (HRW), *"We Have Never Seen Such Horror": Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011), available on the HRW website: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0611webwcover.pdf. Combat between the Syrian military and rebels was reported in June 2011, when the army assaulted Jisr al-Shughur and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man (in Idlib Province) and the Homs Province town of Talkalakh near the Lebanese border.

59. According to some observers, many of the so-called defectors from the army at the end of 2011 were in fact civilian defense units to whom the label "defectors" added more legitimacy.

60. A caveat should be added: Syria was not a militarized country in 2011 (the setting was very different a few months later in 2012/13), wherein citizens had access to large quantities of arms of any caliber, as in Iraq after 2003/4 (with the dissolution of the Iraqi military and the looting of its arsenals after Saddam Husayn's fall) or in Lebanon after the civil war (where arms have been stored by militias, which either demilitarized and transformed into political parties after 1989).

61. The first videos by defectors displayed military officers expressing their disgust toward excessive repression and their involvement in tasks they did not think were part of their functional duties; further videos were much more political and displayed the ideological organization of their struggle according to the tenets of the newly constituted Free Syrian Army. Many soldiers remain in the army, terrified by the consequences of betraying it; reprisals have been systematically exerted on the families of defectors. Many are said to wait for the right moment to defect (or are said to be more useful for the insurgency if they remain inside the army as informants). Some are suspicious of the armed opposition, and others remain loyal to Asad. Philippe Droz-Vincent, "The Syrian Military and the 2011 Uprising."

ficers' Movement, and later the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-Jaysh al-Suri al-Hurr*) after the summer of 2011. After November of that year, new developments consisting of offensive attacks by heavily armed rebels against military convoys or bases occurred, as did ambushes on security forces, where armed groups would avoid direct confrontation with large forces when they had no edge. Armed operations against governmental forces became more widespread, especially after the regime waged a ferocious military crackdown highlighted by the siege on the conservative, impoverished, and unruly neighborhood of Baba 'Amru in Homs between February and March 2012.[62]

After the first half of 2012, limits to violence have been jettisoned and militarization has overshadowed the basic nature of the uprising, peaceful demonstrations against authoritarian rule. This point was at the core of a heated debate in the summer of 2012 between the SNC, the FSA, other opposition groups, and the local coordination committees.[63] However, the opposition's turn to violence should not be interpreted solely as a creeping endogenous militarization of the Syrian uprising; it was also a deliberate product of the regime strategy. Pushing the opposition to take up arms and legitimate the use of violence was in fact creating the opposition that the regime itself wished to conjure by displaying two fighting camps. The Asad regime could more easily justify the use of massive force against armed demonstrators, in comparison to violence against unarmed civilians.[64] The Asad regime's allegations of an armed uprising were false at the beginning, but, as a consequence of the concrete practices of the Asad regime — by demonizing demonstrators and sowing fear and violence — the fears became a reality.

Those in power in Damascus harbored no reluctance in using violent repression to push their country towards civil war,[65] and they closed their eyes to a cycle of summary executions (even of young people and women), mass graves, rapes, a violent cycle summarized in the slogan painted in black paint by governmental loyalists on the walls of restive neighborhoods, "Asad, or we will set the country on fire" (*al-Asad aw nahriq al-bilad*). For those in powerful positions in Damascus living in "bunkerized" conditions, i.e., cut off from what is going on inside their own society by years in the corridors of power and not to speak about their blindness to world trends in an era of globalization, massive protests are seen as an existential threat to their power. Their ensuing behavior is indicative of a deeply ingrained feeling of being entitled to govern Syria, holding a "right

62. Such escalations in violence provoked armed resistance, with the creation of the famous Faruq Brigade in Homs and the rise of its photogenic popular mid-level leader 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Talas, one of the first officers to publicly defect from the army on June 7, 2011.

63. On the rejection of violence by the Local Coordination Committees, see a declaration to the Syrian people cautioning against the use of arms in the uprising, Rédacteur (pseud.), "*Bayan ila al-Sha'b al-Suri: Lijan al-Tansiq al-Mahalliyya fi Suriya*" ["Declaration to the Syrian People: The Local Coordination Committees in Syria"], *Association Souria Houria* [*Suriya Hurriya* (Free Syria) Association] official website, http://souriahouria.com/2011/08/29/بيان-إلى-الشعب-السوري-لجان-التنسيق-الم.

64. The military has been submitted to intense propaganda and scrutiny by the security forces, see for instance, Maria Abi-Habib, "Syrian Defectors Recount Tales of Conflict," *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2012, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304356604577337940580477550.

65. See the interview with the defecting Syrian ambassador to Iraq, an important insider (quite contrary to other Syrian diplomats), Ruth Sherlock, "Exclusive: Why I Defected from Bashar al-Assad's Regime, by Former Diplomat Nawaf Fares," *Telegraph*, July 14, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9400537/Exclusive-interview-why-I-defected-from-Bashar-al-Assads-regime-by-former-diplomat-Nawaf-Fares.html.

to rule," and a vision of opponents as despicable non-players who are unable to offer an alternative.[66] The Asad regime's rhetoric of violence, as exemplified by the terms used in official media campaigns ("war," "war effort," "fight against foreign plots," etc.), is also a product of the perceived mortal challenge for the Asad regime.[67] The 2011 protest movement was a direct threat to the day-to-day governance of the Syrian polity by the Asad regime, namely its essential feature of authoritarian normality. At the time, this was not simply a question of individual opponents or localized movements, including communists, Arab socialists, Arab nationalists, urban liberal signatories of the Damascus Declaration after 2005, Kurdish activists in the northeast in 2004, various Islamist cells, and young activists present in the arts.[68] The regime was able to contain and silence oppositional voices via low-key, though harsh, repression.[69] On the contrary, in 2011, massive, broad-based, apolitical, leaderless, but coordinated, mass demonstrations have offered a deeper challenge in public spaces. For the Syrian regime, the exclusive control of public spaces is crucial: if the government cannot demonstrate that it can preclude others from claiming the same space, it will not prevail. Hence it views protests as a zero-sum game conflict.[70]

The regime resorted to military operations to retake back restive areas, along with massive arrests, especially of young men. Guided by the unwritten rule that a dead protester means his family will take part in demonstrations, while a frightened protester having spent some time in custody or under torture means his family will stay at home for the next few days.[71] The regime also truncated Syrian territory with military checkpoints and the extensive deployment of security forces as a way to partition the popular movement into separate sections, but this failed to quell the protest movement altogether.

Violence has steadily increased in scale, with the use of heavy weapons (tanks, mortars, artillery) in restive regions (Dar'a, Rastan near Homs, Harasta near Damascus, Idlib, etc.) and in civilian-populated neighborhoods of Hama, Homs, Dayr al-Zawr, Duma, etc., and with the regime using the rhetoric of "the war effort" (*al-majhud al-harbi*). Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Dar'a experienced military sieges in the first half of

66. For instance the plan to save the regime leaked from alleged close circles in the presidency is indicative of the Syrian leadership's very closed vision for Syria regime survival, see, "*Al-Khutta al-Siyasiyya li-Inqadh Ma Tabqa min Nizam al-Asad*" ["The Political Plan to Save What Is Left from the Asad Regime"], *All4Syria*, April 30, 2012, http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/38204.

67. On the internal logic of the regime, International Crisis Group (ICG), "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide," *Middle East/North Africa Report* No. 109 (July 13, 2011), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/mena/the-syrian-regimes-slow-motion-suicide.aspx.

68. This is not just the question of a few incidents, such as small gatherings in February 2011 in front of the Libyan embassy in solidarity with Libyan pro-democracy protesters, in a square in the Bab Tuma neighborhood of Damascus in solidarity with Tunisians, in front of the Egyptian embassy to celebrate the ousting of Husni Mubarak, or in front of the interior ministry in solidarity with political prisoners.

69. Joshua Landis and Joe Pace, "The Syrian Opposition," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Winter 2006/7), pp. 45–68; and Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

70. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

71. Some official documents (presumably authentic) have been leaked on Facebook displaying the "not to disclose" tactics of targeted killings or massive repression used by the Asad regime, for instance, "*Kashf Ma Yukhattit Lahu Bashshar: al-Nizam al-Mujrim Aflas wa-Lam Yu'idd Amamahu Alla Ightiyalat*" ["Exposing What Bashar Is Planning: The Criminal Regime Has Failed and Nothing Remains but Assassinations"], *All4Syria*, November 11, 2011, http://all4syria.info/web/archives/36090.

2012. The regime has used artillery against civilian-populated opposition strongholds on a regular basis, increasingly indiscriminately, in the most restive areas. Armed helicopters began to be used systematically after the summer of 2012, and soon after, fighter jets entered the fray. By 2013, the regime was firing ballistic Scud missiles at residential neighborhoods, signaling a recrudescence in indiscriminate violence. Bombings of rebel-controlled areas with warplanes, military helicopters, missiles, and so-called "barrel-bombs" thrown indiscriminately onto residential areas have been used as systematic punitive expeditions that amount to a scorched-earth policy and collective punishments with burning crops, depleting food supplies, and attacks on bakeries, schools, and clandestine opposition hospitals. Violence has been used by the regime to create a reaction by the population, to show it the high price it could pay in physical destruction if it joins the revolution. In another signal of escalating conflict, rumors about numerous small-scale attacks with chemical ammunitions were aired in 2013.[72] This was followed by a massive chemical attack in the outskirts of Damascus in the eastern Ghuta region on August 21, killing between 300 and 1,300 people[73] The logic of war has been an essential way for the Asad regime to resist the rise of mass politics, to "contain" popular demands and social movements, to fracture the militarized opposition, and to reassert a level of control over a restive society by escalating violence and letting the country plunge into civil war — a course the Asad regime has helped to mold.

The Trap of Sectarian War Opened by the Regime

The conflict in Syria took an increasingly sectarian form in 2012/13. War changes the pace, direction, and consequences of social areas, political mobilization, socialization, polarization of social identities, local authorities, gender relations, local political economy, all of which become more fragmented and more militarized. After some time, even in a society not particularly prone to sectarianism, a number of forces drive societies towards sectarian polarization. With the deepening of conflict, violence fuels fear and fear breeds self-closure and allegiance shifts towards sectarian alignments.[74] A variety of factors favor the purchase of sectarianism in enduring showdowns, whether economic competition and grievances, the actions of political entrepreneurs capitalizing on sectarianism and the unnecessary and exaggerated fears of the Other,[75] media

72. Jean-Philippe Rémy, "Chemical Warfare in Syria," *Le Monde*, May 27, 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/27/chemical-war-in-syria_3417708_3218.html.

73. See, Syria Human Rights League in Damascus, "List of 62 Attacks Using Chemical Weapons in Syria 2012–2013," Syrian American Medical Society website, August 24, 2013, http://sams-usa.net/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/List-of-62-attacks-using-Chemical-Weapons-in-Syria-2012-2013.pdf; UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, "Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013," UN official website, http://www.un.org/disarmament/content/slideshow/Secretary_General_Report_of_CW_Investigation.pdf; and "Syria Chemical Attack: What We Know," *BBC News*, September 24, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23927399.

74. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James D. Fearon and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003), pp. 75–90.

75. With the depressing familiar pattern that initial and minor clashes resulting from reactive moves and assertive gestures unleash broad confrontations.

constructing fears in social tissues, or external factors playing a dirty game.[76] This was exactly the process in motion in Syria in 2012/13.

An essential point should be stressed: the "master frame" of the Syrian uprising is not sectarianism, though numerous sectarian incidents have taken place. Even the Muslim Brotherhood distanced itself from sectarian politics and erased descriptions of the Syrian conflict as sectarian from their publications (quite contrary to the 1970s and 80s, when they played on the sectarian card).[77] In the summer of 2012, the crucial battle for Aleppo, which opened up a new phase in the Syrian conflict, was not sectarian: there is no significant 'Alawi population in Aleppo and the *Shabbiha* militiamen there were Sunnis. The crux of the battle was the rebels forcing the influential heart of this vital city (the influential commercial and white-collar middle class of Aleppo) to support the rebels' side.[78] Furthermore, there are brakes on sectarian violence in every society: The existence of a broad-based popular movement predicated on cross-sectarian solidarity and national revival has been a strong counterbalance to sectarian tendencies in Syria. Nevertheless in 2013, moderates who have led a revolt against authoritarian rule, though still heard,[79] have been marginalized by other discourses (such as sectarian exclusion, militarized uproar, and jihadi ideology) and the day-to-day pull of pure hatred and random revenge.

In this complex interplay, the Asad regime has tried with great determination to take advantage of confessional differences and do whatever is necessary to stay in power, even by provoking a civil war and rendering it as sectarian. The regime bet on the fact that precipitating a sectarian breakdown would produce the most favorable environment for the pursuit of its overwhelming military preponderance. The stalemate in 2012/13 was a product of the enduring cohesiveness of the regime in utilizing repressive tactics and the homogeneity of the Syrian society in its opposition to the regime. Sectarianism is thus a good way for the embattled Asad regime to try to

76. Salafi propaganda through Saudi satellite channels has gained a wide following in Syria. See the June 2011 video by Shaykh 'Adnan 'Ar'ur, a Syrian televangelist born in Dar'a, who threatened 'Alawis supporting the regime "to grind them and feed the dogs with their parts." See, "Syrian Sunni Cleric Threatens: 'We Shall Mince [The Alawites] in Meat Grinders,'" YouTube video, 1:08, Wasal TV, June 26, 2011, posted by "MEMRITVVideos," July 13, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bwz8i3osHww.

77. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, "*'Ahd wa-Mithaq min Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fi Suriyya*" ["Covenant and Charter of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Syria"], Syrian Muslim Brotherhood official website, March 25, 2012, http://www.ikhwansyria.com/Portals/Content/?Name=لمسلمين%20في%20سوريا%20الإخوان%20جماعة%20من%20وميثاق%20عهد&info=YVdROU16QTVOREltYzI5MWNtTmxQVk4xWWxCaFoyVW1kSGx3WlQweEpuaHRiR2xrUFNZPSt1.Syr; symptomatically, in the SNC, the Muslim Brothers, though preserving their essential influence in the background, have supported the candidacies of a secular leftist (Burhan Ghalioun), a Kurd (Abdulbaset Sieda), and then a Christian (George Sabra).

78. The Aleppo middle classes have been loyal to the opposition, but they have stayed on the sidelines of the conflict: they were among the first benefactors of the economic modernization under Bashar al-Asad. They were tolerating the Asad regime as "the devil they knew." Furthermore, the FSA troops in this area are mostly from small, lower-class, rural villages, unlike the local civilians Aleppo.

79. In April 2012, an intense battle was waged on the Internet over the name of the April 13 Friday protests between those with an Islamist leaning (voting for "Friday of the Armies of Islam") and those favoring a more inclusive name and nonviolent activism (voting for "A revolution for all Syrians"). There are movements trying to bridge the sectarian divide between Sunnis and 'Alawis, such as the Pulse Movement (*Harakat Nabd*) whose motto is "In Syria there are two sects: the sect of freedom and the sect of the regime" (*Fi Suriya, ta'ifatayn: ta'ifat al-hurriyya wa-ta'ifat al-nizam*).

fragment Syrian society. Furthermore, the Asad regime has tried to present itself as a bulwark against chaos, within Syria as well as in the eyes of outside powers.

The Asad regime has cynically worked to produce a threatening radical opposition: jihadis or Salafi jihadis. At the onset of the uprising, dozens of radical Islamists were liberated from prison by the Asad regime under the guise of a "presidential amnesty" for prisoners in May 2011.[80] Others came to Syria because of the pull effect of war zones in interreligious and sectarian conflicts, similar to Bosnia and Somalia for a short time in the 1990s, or Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s. The logistical and financial help of transnational networks further influenced jihadis to join the conflict. However, not everything is the product of regime manipulation. In the Syrian social landscape, despair before the mounting harsh violence in a stalemate situation also fuels the appeal of extremist discourses among locals; there is also a social dimension, as more conservative, rural, Sunni fighters have taken the upper hand on urban, middle class, more open-minded activists at a time of militarization. Nonetheless, the rise of jihadis at the forefront of the militarized uprising in 2013 has played into the hands of the Asad regime in its claim to wage "a war against terror" (this statement may have been false at the beginning in March 2011, but it had become a reality by 2013). Asad's regime would like to apply the paradigm of the 1974–82 conflict to the present conflict, in which the legitimate government defended Syria from jihadis wreaking chaos.

The Asad regime has benefited from the tilt towards a gruesome sectarian civil war. The FSA is essentially staffed with Sunni Muslims, as numerous brigades of the FSA bear Sunni Islamic names (*Islah, Ansar al-Nabi, Umma Islamiyya*, etc.), as do many jihadi groups (*Liwa' al-Umma, Katibat al-Muhajirin, Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar*). They have gained a free hand in numerous predominantly Sunni villages and neighborhoods, hence the conflict tends to be seen in sectarian terms. More extremist discourses have been heard in 2013 from jihadis and Salafi extremists not part of the FSA, but cooperating with it on a local basis equating 'Alawis with *rawafid* ("rejectionists," a derogatory term in reference to Shi'a) or "Shi'i agents." 'Alawis, even before they become exposed to any serious threat, were arming themselves and turned some of their neighborhoods into being militia-run. A slogan painted on a wall in the Mazza 86 neighborhood in Damascus in the second half of 2012 read: "the Syrian Asad Republic" (*al-Jumhuriyya al-Asadiyya al-Suriyya*), as opposed to the official Syrian Arab Republic.[81] In 2012/13, the bitter sectarian dimension of the conflict has signified the moment has

80. The Syrian regime sent jihadis, both Syrians and foreign fighters crossing the northeastern border, to Iraq after 2003/4 as a way to put pressure on the US by destabilizing their nation-building project in Iraq. Then the Syrian government seemed to have put a break on jihadis' flows crossing to Iraq after 2005 to try to find an accommodation with the US administration; a lot of Syrian jihadi "returnees" were put in jail until being freed in the spring of 2011; "*La Révolution Syrienne, Entre Piège de la Violence et Manœuvres du Régime*" [The Syrian Revolution: Between the Trap of Violence and the Manipulations of the Regime"], An Eye on Syria (blog), August 21, 2012, *Le Monde*, http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/08/21/la-revolution-syrienne-entre-piege-de-la-violence-et-manoeuvres-du-regime-12/; and Basil al-Junaydi, "*Qissat 'Asdiqa' Saydnaya': Aqwa Thalatha Rijal fi Suriya al-Yawm!*" ["The Story of the 'Friends of Saydnaya': The Three Strongest Men in Syria Today!"], *al-Jumhuriyya*, October 16, 2013, http://therepublicgs.net/2013/10/16/قصة-أصدقاء-صيدنايا-أقوى-ثلاثة-رجال.

81. Unsubstantiated accounts of massacres or exactions against 'Alawis were circulated in 2012; rumors of terrorists desacrating dead bodies of 'Alawis were widespread; and there were rumors of an 'Alawi rump state in preparation in the Coastal Mountain Range.

passed when many 'Alawis might have sided with the rebels. Even 'Alawis not connected with the power networks of the Asad regime who may still harbor resentment toward the regime, but many 'Alawis fear the opposition and feel that they have no choice but to back Asad. In a similar way, noncommitted Christians have felt threatened by the rise of jihadi groups. After car bomb attacks in Christian neighborhoods in Damascus and Aleppo, armed community protection groups (*lijan sha'biyya*) had been popping up in 2012. The rise of sectarianism and jihadi extremism played to the advantage of the Asad regime in influencing the "silent majority" to stay with the government, not out of conviction, but because they see it as the lesser evil. People on the ground are defending their homes rather than the regime. If the opposition does not present itself as credible enough to persuade minorities to turn sides, they stick with the regime for lack of an alternative.

Furthermore, the disorganized militarization of the uprising via proliferating insurgent bands, the roaming government-sponsored *Shabbiha* militias, and the large security apparatus has fueled local chaos. Attempts by activists and FSA commanders to impose order and an acceptable code of conduct onto local opposition fighters have been unsuccessful. Rebels have been involved in horrible acts, some with sectarian overtones. Some examples from 2013 include images of a Salafi shaykh preaching above the corpse of a governmental officer who was beheaded, a rebel commander from the Faruq Brigade (named after the Caliph 'Umar bin al-Khattab, who was known as al-Faruq and rejected by Shi'a) biting into the lung of a dead soldier as revenge, the video showing jihadis decapitating a prisoner with a knife, and the Nusra Front fighters boasting about killing Shi'a in a village.[82] The turn to violence opened an avenue for uncontrolled violent outbreaks with militias playing politics but also engaging in banditry, or some armed actors benefiting from a sense of impunity, as exemplified by the increased number of abductions for ransom in 2012/13. Militia groups linked to the Asad regime were presumably implicated in a series of gruesome massacres which the regime ignored or implicitly condoned, in Hula (108 dead, May 2012), Qubayr (86 dead, June 2012), Turaymisa (103 dead, July 2012), and Darayya (300 dead, August 2012). Most incidents have taken place in areas located between predominantly Sunni and 'Alawi areas in the northwestern countryside. War and its savagery has a transformative effect, and, in 2013, each side was publicizing its enemy's savagery to excuse its own radicalization in sectarian violence.

82. These extremely horrendous videos can be watched on the Internet, though some have been censored due to the violence of images: "*Kalima Qawiyya li-Ahad al-Mujahidin Jabhat al-Nusra fawq Juththat Qa'id al-Liwa' 38*" ["One of the Mujahideen of the Nusra Front's Strong Word Over the Corpse of the Leader of Group 38"], YouTube video, 5:30, posted by "almata3yeh," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sp2_rY9Rro; HRW, "Syria Brigade Fighting in Homs Implicated in Atrocities," HRW official website, May 13, 2013, http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/13/syria-brigade-fighting-homs-implicated-atrocities; Ayfer Erkul, Maud Oeyen, and Koen Vidal, "*Syriëstrijders Begaan Oorlogsmisdaden*" ["Syrian Fighters Committed War Crimes"], *De Morgen*, June 8, 2013, http://www.demorgen.be/dm/nl/990/Buitenland/article/detail/1648206/2013/06/08/Syriestrijders-begaan-oorlogsmisdaden.dhtml; "*Iqtiham Qaryat al-Masrab alladhin Qatalu al-Mujahid Qaswara, min qabl Ashawis Jabhat al-Nusra 2013-04-21*" ["The Assault on the Village of al-Masrab which Killed the Jihad Fighter Qaswara, Before the Triumphs of the Nusra Front, April 21, 2013"], YouTube video, 6:16, posted by "*Tansiqiyyat Markada al-Hurra*" ["The Free Markada Steering Committee"], April 21, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJfIGbBKHQM; "*Ihraq Buyut li-l-Shi'a fi Qaryat Hatla bi-Rif Dayr al-Zawr*" ["Burning of Shi'a Houses in the Village of Hatla in the Dayr al-Zawr Countryside"], YouTube video, posted by "syrian observatory," June 12, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg2lZH7RTBs.

THE TRAGEDY NEVER ENDS? DANGERS OF CIVIL WAR AND REGIONAL CONFLICT LOOMING AHEAD

In 2011, an active Syrian civil society emerged out of nothing, adapted itself to the Asad regime's attempts to squash it, and gradually built itself into a viable political and military actor. However, the Asad regime has been able to keep some degree of coherence, although its only remaining "administrative" arm is the military/security apparatus. The regime has been able to resist the prospect of transition by shifting the dynamics of contention towards the trap of war and the dreadful prospect of sectarian conflict. But, as the conflict endures, regional and international factors have added a new layer of complexity. Syria is at the intersection of every key strategic rivalry in the Middle East. It touches many of the hot spots in the region: Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Turkey and the Kurdish question, and Iran's ideological influence in the Arab world. A smooth and quick transition would have put external strategic interests in face of a new setting they would have to adjust to, as exemplified by the Egyptian transition in a key state in the Middle East.

An international intervention in Syria according to the Libyan model — NATO's intervention in Libya invoking "the responsibility to protect" in Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 was a rare window of opportunity and perceived as a Western "trick" by Russia and China — to ease the end of the incumbent regime was blocked by Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council in February 2012.[83] The chemical weapons "redline" was crossed blatantly (seemingly by the Asad regime) on August 21, 2013, but international intervention spearheaded by France and a reluctant United States was precluded by a Russian-American plan to regain control of the Asad regime's chemical weapons, allowing the conventional war continue. International and regional factors have exacerbated the inherent contradictions of the Syrian uprising (that have already been manipulated by the Asad regime): peaceful versus armed resistance; nationalist versus sectarian (anti-'Alawi) movements; Arab versus Kurdish components of the uprising; secular versus religious movements, etc.

The militarization of the uprising was also fuelled in 2012/13 by inflows of money from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, and via arms coming through the Lebanese and Turkish borders. The Syrian opposition would not have taken arms so easily had it not been convinced by Western support and incentives by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and transnational Salafi networks. Likewise, the regime could not have unleashed its "war effort" without the political support and logistical lifeline from Russia and Iran. Furthermore in 2013, Hizbullah, along with Iranian and Iraqi Shi'i militias, was directly involved in the conflict, especially after the battle of Qusayr in May and June, and was pivotal to the Asad regime's resilience. Regional interventions have further added to the basic nature of the Syrian uprising other dichotomous regional alignments and discourses. Shi'a versus Sunnis, a regional "cold war" between Sunni Arab states, such as

83. Philippe Droz-Vincent, "The 'Dark Side' of the Syrian Uprising and Its Potentially Dire Regional Consequences" policy brief of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), April 20, 2012, http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/816eb6ee5fb3b2088cc405c9d6e5dec8.pdf.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Shi'i Iran and its allies. As a regional hot spot, Syria has given more purchase to extremist and violent groups, such as jihadis, violent Salafis, and al-Qa'ida–affiliated movements.

At the end of 2013, the Syrian conflict had become a race against time for the opposition. On one hand, the militarization is a temporary way out of stalemate for the Syrian opposition (whose aim remains a free and democratic civilian state). But on the other hand, dangers of enduring sectarian civil war as the end result of militarization (a trend also cultivated by the regime) loom in a very complex regional setting and with the upper hand gained on the ground by jihadi and Salafi brigades over the FSA. As a consequence, the essence of the opposition movement — massive peaceful demonstrations convened around generic slogans calling for a free and democratic Syria — were overshadowed in 2012/13 by gruesome violence and increased militarization. Nonetheless, these goals have not been completely lost.[84] At the end of 2013, Syria's mobilized civil society and its local coordination committees still struggled to retain influence in the future dynamics in the country. They are still very active, providing information to protect the civilian population, getting funds and provisions for residents, and building a kind of participatory democracy from below, with elected councils replacing the retreating Ba'thist state. In conclusion, it is not certain that Syria is doomed for a future of sectarian war and jihadi violence.

84. "No to violence," along with "no to foreign intervention" and "no to sectarianism," were the "three noes" that were pivotal to the movement at its inception in March 2011.