A Historical Perspective of the Syrian Conflict

What Went Wrong: Understanding the Trajectory of Syria's Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict raises numerous puzzles and theoretical issues bearing on traditions of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) politics and IR, such as authoritarian resilience, democratisation, social movement theory, sectarianism, and civil wars. This chapter addresses key questions, contextualised within these wider bodies of literature, regarding the origins of the uprising and its subsequent trajectory: (1) what were the causes of the conflict, both in terms of structure (crisis and contradictions within the pre-uprising order) and agency (choices of the actors)? and (2) why did the uprising lead to neither democratisation nor revolution from below and instead descend into violent semi-sectarian civil war and a failed state?

A HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY LENS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

As a lens for taking this macro and long-term view of the crisis, *Historical Sociology* (thereafter, HS) has several advantageous points of departure (Hobden and Hobson 2002: 3–59).

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1. *Path dependency*: much of the analysis of the Syrian conflict is afflicted by "presentism" and an over-stress on agency—usually framed as the "good guys" (peaceful protestors) versus the "bad guys" (the dictator, jihadists). By contrast, HS warns us that history matters: specifically, the historical evolution of structures sharply constrains the options of agents that tend to reproduce power practices that have historically "worked." These notably include those identified by the father of sociology, Ibn Khaldun, and systemised by Max Weber.

2. *Co-constitution of states and states systems*: while some of the analyses of the Syrian conflict often see external factors as secondary, HS tells us that states and states systems co-constitute each other; by extension, *state failure* is also co-constituted by the interaction of the "international" and "domestic" (or internal) forces.

3. *Agency and structure's* interaction explains Syria's trajectory. Path dependency narrowed options but the choices among these, that is to say the road taken by agents at several key junctures, led to quite different outcomes than those that would likely have followed from other choices; these altered, in turn, the structural context within which subsequent actors had to operate. To paraphrase Marx, men make their own history, not in conditions of their own choosing, but in circumstances transmitted from the past (Marx 1852).

The Junctures of the Syrian Conflict's Trajectory

Syria's vulnerability to the spread of the "Arab Spring" was in good part owing to the flaws built into the structures of rule that Bashar al-Asad inherited, exacerbated by his own neo-liberal reform project. If Bashar's choices were importantly shaped by the state-building undertaken by his father, so the challenges faced by Hafez and the solutions he found for consolidating his government can, in turn, only be understood in context. This means, above all, the unfavourable conditions bequeathed to Syrian state-builders in the post-WWI imposition by the Western great powers of the regional states system—an episode popularly, if somewhat historically inaccurately, known as "Sykes-Picot".

Once the Syrian uprising began, several key junctures—points at which several alternative roads were possible—shaped the conflict's trajectory, as summarised in Fig. 2.1. The onset of the uprising, via the successful
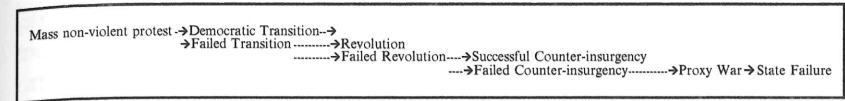

Mass non-violent protest →Democratic Transition--→
      →Failed Transition ----------→Revolution
            ----------→Failed Revolution----→Successful Counter-insurgency
                  ---→Failed Counter-insurgency----------→Proxy War→State Failure

Fig. 2.1 Junctures in the Syrian conflict's trajectory

mobilisation of mass protests in spite of an unfavourable opportunity structure, initially appeared to be a triumph of agency by thousands of ordinary citizens. At this juncture, several of the conditions under which non-violent protest might have led to democratisation were present; but owing to the choices of hardliners in both government and opposition, and among external powers, this window of opportunity was missed. At the second juncture, the failure of democratic transition and the militarisation of the opposition might have led to revolution from below, but Syria's social structure was biased against this and government strategies (agency) obstructed it. With the failure of revolution, government "counter-insurgency" might have prevailed, but external intervention on behalf of the opposition cost the government its monopoly of violence and territorial control. This, together with tit-for-tat violence (agency of government, opposition, and external interveners), tipped Syria into a failed state. Balanced intervention for and against the government kept a compromise political settlement off the agenda. Finally, the structural conditions created by state failure and the fragmentation of governance in this vacuum, in turn, shaped agency, namely, "competitive regime remaking" and a cross-border spillover which could remake "Sykes-Picot" itself—a return to the starting point of the Syrian tragedy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Syrian crisis cannot be understood in isolation from state formation across the Levant in which the states created after WWI have been in recurring crisis since their birth; not only Syria but Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan have all experienced regular combinations of domestic revolution, civil war, and external intervention.

Thus, an essential context for understanding the Syrian crisis is the Western imperial imposition of the regional states system in what Fromkin called a "peace to end all peace" (Fromkin 1989). This created a set of profoundly flawed states in some ways "set up to fail": identity was fragmented, with powerful sub- and supra-state identities competing with

state identity for the loyalty of populations. Irredentism was thus pervasive, giving rise to successive radical trans-state movements against what were seen as "artificial" states. This so afflicted Levantine states with deep instability, that for a period they were considered nearly ungovernable. Of the several revisionist movements that mobilised in the 1950s and 1960s across the region, the Ba'ath party was the most successful, coming to power in Syria and Iraq.

Thereafter, the rise and decline of Ba'athist state-building set these two states on similar trajectories, the second context, for understanding the current crisis. After two decades of experience with various governance formulas from monarchy or liberal oligarchy to charismatic military dictatorship, Ba'athist state-builders in the two states, nearly simultaneously hit on a winning power building formula with patrimonial practices combined with Leninist party organisation, centralising bureaucratic practices, etatism, and populist distribution (Hinnebusch 1990). This appeared to stabilise robust regimes and strengthen state-centric identities in both Syria and Iraq; however, these regimes also had similar built-in vulnerabilities which came to the surface when, for various reasons, they passed their consolidation peaks, manifested in domestic grievances that intersected in varying ways with external intervention to produce profound crises in both states.

State Formation Under Hafez al-Asad: Neo-patrimonial Regime Consolidation

Neo-patrimonial regimes—hybrids of personal and bureaucratic authority—are ubiquitous in the Middle East. Particularly in fragmented societies such as the Levant, the use of asabiyya (primordial ties) to construct cores of trusted followers around the patrimonial leader, is a historically reproduced technology of power. Thus, Hafez al-Asad constructed his "presidential monarchy" by inserting trusted men drawn from his family, tribe, and Alawi sect in the command posts of the state. In particular, trusted sectarians were appointed to the security apparatus charged with defence of his regime, hence with implementing hard repression against opposition and whose loyalty and stake in the regime was so strong they were unlikely to defect.

Yet, the patrimonial core of the state rested on a large bureaucratic apparatus that co-opted much wider social forces, indeed incorporated cross-sectarian, cross-class alliances into government institutions. Thus,

co-optation to ministerial office took place via a sort of communal arithmetic in which each sectarian group was represented; semi-Leninist party organisation penetrated and recruited in all communities, paralleled with populist redistribution (land reform, state employment), giving wider strata stakes in the regime. Economic liberalisation was used to co-opt the Damascene merchant class. The availability of rent (oil revenues, foreign aid) provided patronage to incorporate key elite constituencies. Legitimacy was built around supra-state secular Arab nationalism (Hinnebusch 1990).

This state-building ended Syria's endemic instability and consolidated nearly a half-century of Ba'athist rule. The test of robustness of the al-Asad government was its survival of the Ikhwan's Islamist revolt of 1978–1982. This was a direct result of the particular hybrid construction of the regime, explained, on the one hand, by the loyalty of the Alawi-dominated security forces and, on the other, by the fragmentation of Sunnis, with those incorporated into government institutions (Sunni peasants) or co-opted (Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie), remaining loyal. Hence, Ba'athist state-building appeared quite robust, in combining patrimonial authority with bureaucratic capacities. This seemed to overcome the vulnerabilities of a fragmented society and allowed the Ba'athist government to survive repeated crises.

This regime had, however, special vulnerabilities that, in some respects, were the other side of the coin of its strengths. One was the dominance of the al-Asad administration by Alawi officers in a Sunni-majority society, which tended to alienate many Sunnis; another was the repression of the opposition, which stored up animosities. These flaws were initially overcome by populist measures such as land reform by which the government won over plebeian constituencies, notably Sunni peasants (Hinnebusch 1990). However, such inclusion of constituencies required governmental command of significant revenues; but the state, overdeveloped relative to its economic base, generated a frequent fiscal deficit that could only be sustained by external "rent." Hafez al-Asad deftly used his nationalist foreign policy, making Syria a front-line state with Israel, to access aid from the Arab Gulf states and Iran and cheap arms and protection from the Soviet Union; however, this also embroiled Syria in costly conflicts with Israel and in Lebanon and generated Western hostility—particularly dangerous after al-Asad lost his Cold War era Soviet patron. Moreover, in the 1990s economic aid declined, and while the gap was temporarily filled by Syria's own oil revenues, these were set to decline in the 2000s. The ruling formula was becoming unsustainable.

Syria Under Bashar al-Asad

The transformation of the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Asad has to be understood as an instance of a region-wide movement from populist ("PA") to post-populist ("PPA") forms of authoritarianism widely discussed in MENA literature on the 1990–2010 period (King 2009; Guazzone and Pioppi 2009). As a result of the vulnerabilities of populism, chiefly the exhaustion of statist development, the MENA state aimed to activate private and foreign investment as alternative engines of growth, a strategy pursued, however, at the cost of its sacrificing of the original popular support on which it had initially consolidated itself. This move was accompanied by what Heydemann (2007) called "authoritarian upgrading," on which there is also extensive literature, by which regimes supposedly adapted to the global hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism and tried to compensate for the loss of their populist constituencies by co-opting new more privileged business constituencies; yet for every vulnerability of the populist period supposedly "fixed" by this, such "upgrading" had negative side effects and produced new vulnerabilities.

Bashar al-Asad's immediate challenges on coming to power were two-fold: he sought to adapt the economy to the decline in rent by accessing alternative new sources of revenues; since Syria was being isolated in the West because of nationalist foreign policies (e.g. opposition to the US invasion of Iraq), this focused notably on attracting expatriate and Gulf capital. This, it was thought, required such neo-liberal policies as tax cuts, tariff removals, cuts in welfare subsidies and in public services. Second, Asad sought to concentrate power in the presidency and to throw off the accountability, that existed at the time of succession, to his father's cronies—the "old guard" and to the Ba'ath party collegial leadership. After a long struggle with the old guard, Bashar successfully purged them at a 2005 party congress. In parallel, new elites were co-opted to power—the technocrats charged with implementing the economic reforms and new crony capitalists flourishing on them, notably his cousin, Rami Makhlouf (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014).

One reason observers did not expect the uprising to spread to Syria was that "authoritarian upgrading" was perceived to be working, successfully compensating for risks of post-populism (Haddad 2011). The young president, having the image of a reformer and also of a nationalist due to his standing against Israel and also the US invasion of Iraq, seemed to enjoy considerable personal legitimacy. The co-optation of new constituents was making up for those being excluded—new businessmen, returning expatriates. Gulf investment was coming in, enabling a new life of consumption in the big cities for the upper middle class. Islamic charities were allowed to fill the gap in decline of state welfare services, appeasing Islamic opinion (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014). Moreover, neo-liberal exclusion of the lower strata was recent and less advanced than, for example, in Egypt.

Yet, this disguised the vulnerabilities that these policies were aggravating. The purge of the old guard Sunni barons had narrowed the elite and cost the al-Asad government the support of their clientele networks in Sunni society. It made the regime over-dependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons and technocrats lacking support bases. Bashar had debilitated the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions, which he saw as resisting his reforms, but this also enervated his regime's connection to its rural Sunni constituency. Indeed, as the party and corporatist infrastructure of the administration contracted, the intrusive and arbitrary behaviour of the corrupt security forces that filled the vacuum became more intolerable, hence the ubiquitous demand for "dignity" during the protests. The structural balance in the regime was shifting toward patrimonial authority at the expense of bureaucratic and inclusionary capacity. Neo-patrimonial regimes, as the Arab uprisings show, are vulnerable to deconstruction as power shifts from the ruling party/bureaucracy to the presidential family. In Syria, this was exaggerated and made more salient by the sectarian cleavage between the al-Asad government's inner core and the Sunni majority and fed a perception of sectarian discrimination against the latter (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014; Perthes 2004).

The costs of post-populist change can be seen in the neglect of the regime's former peasant constituency. Land reform and subsidisation of agriculture had established a rural base on which the regime had consolidated itself against its historically urban-centred rivals. This base was, however, being enervated by forces partly outside of the regime's control. Inexorable population growth on relatively fixed land resources meant that the typically multiple sons of the land reform peasants that had been the backbone of government support in villages were left landless, forced on to a shrinking job market, and therefore unincorporated into the government's rural base. At the same time, as Ba'athist ideology declined, the vacuum was gradually filled by the penetration of the countryside by Islamist discourse, where it hitherto had had little resonance. Then, in the later 2000s Syria was hit by a drought of unprecedented severity, causing thousands to desert the villages in the east of the country and crowd into suburbs of the main cities. Not only was the response of the government

to their distress ineffectual but, at the same time, it was withdrawing rural subsidies, notably those on diesel fuel that peasants needed to power irrigation pumps (Hinnebusch et al. 2011). This was paralleled by a growing perception that, while the Sunni peasant majority was suffering, Alawis were given preferences for scarce jobs and Alawi crony capitalists enriching themselves on their insider connections. All of this was making the rural areas, small towns, and suburbs hotbeds of discontent that would be mobilised in the uprising.

The Ba'athist regime had, from its creation, built-in vulnerabilities that Hafez al-Asad had managed, aided by the right conditions—bipolarity, oil rent—to stay on top of. Bashar al-Asad tried to adapt to the less favourable environment of global neo-liberalism, by policies chiefly beneficial to crony capitalists and largely dependent on Gulf capital: even as the upper strata of society were acquiring a greater stake in the state, those at the bottom were being excluded and becoming more receptive to opposition discourse, whether liberal or Islamist.

In some respects, the deconstruction of Syria's ruling formula was an artefact of a new post-bipolar globalised world. Thus, even as the global convergence toward a homogeneous neo-liberalism was forcing MENA's rent-poor republics to renege on the populist "social contract" around which they had initially consolidated their power (and also as they lost former Soviet patron), globalisation was also diffusing new media and internet technology. These spread both West-centric democratisation and Islamist discourses that helped to delegitimise the post-populist ruling formulas of regimes such as Bashar al-Asad's in Syria.

The Syrian Uprising: From Non-violent Protest to Proxy War

Syria's trajectory, starting with the beginning of the uprising, was defined by several junctures, where more than one turning point was possible, but the route taken then set up a path dependency that largely closed off many alternatives and set the country on a path to civil, and ultimately, proxy war.

Juncture 1: The Spread of the Arab Uprisings to Syria

Grievances might have been high among the many disadvantaged by Bashar al-Asad's post-populism, but the collective action problem seemed insurmountable and the opportunity structure for social movements in Syria unpromising. Civil society was too controlled and atomised to be a vehicle of mobilisation; for example, Syria had low and recent IT penetration compared to Egypt and Tunisia where it had been used to overcome atomisation and mobilise protest. There were no recognised nationwide charismatic leaders to mobilise protestors and no pre-existing organisation, although locally religious leaders sometimes made mosques available once the uprising got underway. However, insofar as leadership and organisation emerged they were the product of mobilisation, not the cause of it.

What explained what seemed then to be spontaneous individual decisions to join protests? The rational choice theory, often used to understand such decisions, cannot explain them in the Syrian context given the likely high costs for protestors: people knew the security forces were loyal and would not hesitate to use violence, as the repression of the 1982 Hama uprising had shown. There was also the fact that, in an authoritarian state intolerant of public dissent, oppositionists cannot know how many are with them and hence rational actors would be risk adverse and even if protests begin by the ideologically committed, the majority would be expected to "free ride", making the so-called collective action problem insurmountable. However, calculations of the likely success of protest are important and, as such, crucial to overcoming the collective action problem was the demonstration effect of the uprisings in other Arab states where in fact the security forces did turn against presidents; this, when combined with a wishful thinking that Syria was not that different from them (inaccurate analogies), changed calculations of dissidents as to their chances of success. There was also a certain loss of fear among the generation that did not experience Hama and spearheaded the uprising. Nevertheless, since individual self-interest would have deterred participation, some other powerful motivation must have driven mobilisation. Moral outrage at government killings seem to have motivated many. The role of tribal ties in overcoming atomisation in the rural suburbs, for example, in Dara'a where resistance to the regime first flared up before spreading elsewhere, was also important: when fellow tribesmen were killed by the security forces, honour required exacting revenge.

Mobilisation took place on two levels: at the local level, coordinating committees planned day-to-day protests, while cyber activists used the internet to share information, coordinate and publicise their protests, keep the momentum going, and convey a sense of national-level solidarity (Ghattas 2011). The result was that, with amazing rapidity, massive and unprecedented anti-regime mobilisation took place throughout 2011 and into 2012. Indeed, mass protests spread to most of Syria's towns and cities

(if much less so in Damascus and Aleppo), with hundreds of thousands mobilising on successive Fridays. Whole quarters, suburbs, and towns fell out of government control. The protestors, although at first mostly unarmed, posed a serious threat to the regime's survival. Its security forces, lacking training and experience in crowd control, responded with excessive violence, multiplying its enemies and making funerals occasions for more confrontation. Government mismanagement of protests sparked the uprising and the internet, despite its relatively low penetration, provided enough connectivity to spread it countrywide (ICG 2011).

Juncture 2: The Failure of Non-violent Protest to Enable Democratic Transition

Two theories on transition explain how this mass non-violent protest might have led to a democratic transition in Syria. According to the non-violent resistance paradigm, mass protest on the scale that Syria experienced was more than sufficient to set entrain a destabilisation of the government. Moreover, as the paradigm predicts, repressive violence by the government only furthered resistance and could provoke foreign intervention (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Indeed, this was the calculation of the protestors. However, the two other ingredients needed, fracture of the ruling elite and defection of the security forces, did not happen on a sufficient scale.

The theory of pacted transition suggests why the elite did not fracture (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). In the scenario of pacted transitions, an elite split takes the form of government soft-liners marginalising the hardliners and linking up with moderates in the opposition to agree a move toward democratisation that would guarantee the vital interests of the incumbent elite. This is most likely where opposition can mobilise enough mass protest to empower soft-liners in the government, whilst at the same time moderates within the opposition keep control such that its goals are minimalist—reform, power-sharing rather than government overthrow. Its methods must be non-violent, allowing agreement on preserving the vital interests of government elites and the marginalisation of hardliners on both sides. Concretely, if the president is a hardliner, the military high command has to abandon him (as in Egypt and Tunisia, where presidential families and the military command were at odds).

However, in Syria, hardliners on both sides marginalised the soft-liners. Bashar al-Asad aligned with the hardline security chiefs and abandonment

of the president was deterred by the shared interests and sectarian affiliations of political and military elites; pushed aside were regime soft-liners such as Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa, Republican Guard commander Manaf Tlass, and Chief of Staff Ali Habib, all of whom counselled against use of force against protestors (Lesch 2012: 99, 116).

Hardliners quickly assumed the upper hand within the opposition as well and the goals of at least key parts of the opposition were maximalist. Indeed, determined activists, many of them exiles, systematically set out to spread the Arab uprising to Syria, using the internet and promoting a discourse of democratisation meant to delegitimise the government. The role of the Muslim Brotherhood in inciting the insurrection (via the "Facebook page of the Syrian revolution") particularly raised alarm bells in a government that had fought the Brothers for 40 years. In some instances, the government was deliberately provoked, for example, an anti-Alawi incitement by Salafi shaykhs; attacks on party headquarters, the officers' club, and statues of Hafez al-Asad; and incidents of armed attacks on the government's security forces (Worth 2013; Joya 2012). This, together with a perception that making concessions had led to the fall of other presidents, led the regime progressively to increase the level of repression aimed at protestors which, in turn, turned the protesters to demand the fall of the regime.

As several analysts argued, the mistake of the Syrian protest movement was its "rush to confrontation" with the government while the latter still retained significant support (Mandour 2013). Even though the government conceded many reforms that the opposition had been demanding for decades, those committed to its removal dismissed them as inadequate and insincere. The spilling of blood happened so quickly on such a significant scale that compromise was soon rejected on both sides. Opposition activists were not only morally outraged at the regime's killings but also believed that they could only be safe if the al-Asad regime was totally destroyed since if it survived it would be certain to seek retribution. The opposition hardliners were also deluded by false analogies that the overthrow of presidents in Egypt or Tunisia would be replicated in Syria (Mandour 2013).

This led to the marginalisation of opposition moderates, the older generation of traditional opposition, often former Marxists or Nasserites, organised in the National Coordination Committee (NCC) that opposed foreign intervention and sought a compromise settlement (Lesch 2012: 170–174). They put forth such a proposal at the Samiramis conference in

June 2013, a last chance to engineer non-violent transition, but it was rejected by both regime and opposition. As the older generation moderate opposition leaders lost control of their erstwhile followers, the revolutionary youth, there was no credible soft-line opposition leaders able to bargain with the government.

Western response to the conflict also aggravated the hardline dispositions on both sides. The West's discourse of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and of humanitarian intervention, combined with the Libya example, encouraged the opposition to expect foreign intervention and drove their continued rebellion. It led them to rebuff attempts by two UN mediators to broker a compromise settlement. It also enhanced regime cohesion since all knew that the fall of the al-Asad government would bring on the International Criminal Court (ICC). Thus, Western interference reinforced the hardliners on both sides (Lesch 2012: 164–165).

Did agency, therefore, defeat the potential for democratic transition? This assumes that had key actors made different choices, outcomes could have been different. Perhaps the one actor who could have made the biggest difference was the President. What if Bashar al-Asad led the soft-liners instead of the hardliners? Some think the outcome would have been different; he could have won a free election and led the process of reform. Unfortunately, his March 30, 2011, speech at the beginning of the protests, in which he deprecated popular grievances, disillusioned the many who wanted him to use the crisis to advance reform (Lesch 2012; Wieland 2012).

Yet, it could well be that the regime was not at the time reformable, at least not without what might have been considered to its upholders to be excessive risks. The toxic combination of sect and crony capitalism on which the regime had come to be based was arguably incompatible with a liberal transition. Bringing in majoritarian democracy, particularly at a time when the decline of the Ba'ath party had debilitated its capacity to deliver cross-sectarian electoral support, carried a high risk that voting would be along sectarian lines empowering Sunni politicians at the expense of the Alawis. Democratisation would also empower the disadvantaged masses to attack the policies that constituted the crony capitalism that had enriched the ruling elite.

Juncture 3: Failure of Revolution from Below

A second juncture in Syria's trajectory came once peaceful democratic transition had failed. Given the scale of resistance, it was always possible that mass mobilisation might lead to revolution from below. By 2012

many outsiders believed the regime was on the ropes. But they were wrong: why?

Revolution requires a split in the regime combined with bandwagoning of much of society against it, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt. However, neo-patrimonial states like Syria, where the elites are united by sectarian ties around a patrimonial leader, are less vulnerable to elite fracture and where the regime retains coercive and co-optative capabilities, it can contain anti-regime mobilisation.

Bandwagoning mobilisation against the regime requires a cross-class (middle-lower class) coalition; this takes a high and widely shared level of grievances. In Syria, while many were aggrieved by Bashar al-Asad's policies, others had welcomed them. Importantly, Syria's social structure was not favourable: anti-regime mobilisation on cross-class grounds was *crosscut* by communal and urban-rural cleavages. When cleavages are cross cut, mobilisation along the lines of *both* class (horizontal) and communal (vertical) cleavages is diluted.

Syria's uprising cleavages took a distinctive form that reflected both the success and the vulnerabilities of Bashar's post—populist authoritarian upgrading. Different from Egypt but somewhat similar to Libya, the uprising was geographically dispersed and away from the capital, beginning in the rural peripheries, then spreading to small towns, suburbs, and medium-sized cities, where its foot soldiers were unemployed youth, refugees from drought, and others among the "losers" of a decade of post-populist neo-liberalism. For a considerable period, protest was contained in the periphery, while the centres of power (Damascus) and business (Aleppo) stayed relatively immune. This corresponded precisely to the geographical distribution of benefits and costs of Bashar's post-populist upgrading. Different from other cases, also, was that the uprising had from the beginning a sectarian dimension, inevitable given the Alawi dominance of the regime and the concentration of the uprising among the majority Sunnis. The main occasion for mobilisation became Friday prayers, with imams, natural leaders of their neighbourhoods and, outside the main cities, mostly anti-regime, taking the lead. Saudi-financed Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood connected elements actively mobilised protestors. Initial centres of grievances were mixed areas where Alawis and Sunni lived together as in Latakia, Banias, and Homs. The uprising then spread to Hama and Deir Ez-Zor, traditional bastions of Sunni piety resentful of the secular regime. Tribes also played a role; the decline of the security forces' control of them through subsidies and exemptions and its replacement by Saudi money was important in the government's loss of control over the tribal periphery (Hinnebusch 2012).

Given this character of the opposition—pious lower class, rural, and Sunni—the social base on which the regime relied to survive had many of the opposite characteristics and was the product of a decade of "authoritarian upgrading." It comprised the crony capitalists, urban government employees, and the minorities, especially Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians who, not suffering from the restrictions on public religiosity and church building typical elsewhere in the Muslim world, were rallied by exploiting their fear of Salafi Islam. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where the investment boom, the take-off of tourism, and the new consumption were concentrated remained largely quiescent months into the uprising, although their poor suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. The regime was able to mobilise significant counter-demonstrations in these cities. The middle class of the two main cities originally saw Bashar as a reformer and, while they were disillusioned by his repression of the protestors, they preferred a peaceful democratisation and feared instability and loss of their secular modern lifestyle if traditional rural or Salafi insurgents took power. While exiled businessmen who had lost out to government-connected operators were big funders of the insurgency, much of the in-country business class saw no alternative to the regime and initially hoped it would end the disorder (Abbas 2011). The unevenness of the uprising, notably its inability to overcome the regime at the power centres, reflects the concentration of many winners of Bashar's post-populist strategy in the main cities; while the relocation of the (especially Islamist) opposition from the cities (its heartland in the 1980s rebellion) to the rural periphery in 2011 exactly mirrors the post-populist shift in the regime's base (Abboud 2016: 78–80).

The regime's survival strategy was also key to a partial sectarian polarisation that obstructed mass-based revolution. The regime sought to rally its minority base, particularly the Alawite-dominated security forces, which being implicated in violence, could expect retribution if the government fell; indeed, the security forces' use of violence against protestors did not cause big defections since the opposition was painted as a sectarian other (jihadi) among the government's constituency. The government also sought, by accusing the opposition of Islamist terrorism, to frame the alternatives for the middle class as the social peace it protected or else jihadi violence in order to deter many in the "middle"—other minorities, the Sunni upper middle class in Damascus and Aleppo—from bandwagoning with the opposition. Indeed, a significant portion of them acquiesced in the regime as the lesser of two evils; this was all the more the case once

radical Islamists, and especially al-Qaida-linked jihadists, assumed a high profile within the opposition and as the opposition fragmented into warring camps (Lesch 2012: 51–52; Abboud 2016: 77–80). The opposition also started framing the conflict as sectarian in order to mobilise the Sunni majority. However, the Sunni community remained divided by urban-rural/class cleavages: much of the urban upper middle class refrained from bandwagoning against the government.

This scenario is quite at odds with the non-violent resistance or revolutionary scenarios in which the government is isolated from the vast majority of the population, precipitating its collapse, and it distinguishes Syria from Tunisia and Egypt where the incumbent presidents proved unable to rally sufficient support to survive. This exemplifies how differences in the social structures of societies make for important variations in the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes to revolt: in relatively homogeneous societies such as Egypt and Tunisia, mass anti-government mobilisation is likely to be much more thorough and decisive than in communally diverse ones like Syria.

Thus, there were enough grievances in Syria to produce an uprising among a big segment of the Syrian population but not enough to lead to the bandwagoning needed for revolution or regime collapse. The bottom line is: a revolutionary scenario requires a rather exceptional broad mobilisation by a united society against a divided state; in Syria, by contrast, a cohesive regime confronted a divided society.

Juncture 4: Toward Proxy War: Between Failed Revolution and Failed Counter-insurgency

Even as revolution was failing, government counter-insurgency might have been the alternative outcome. Once protests turned into armed insurgency, the government, with an organised army behind it, had a great advantage over fragmented, lightly armed insurgents. Yet, counter-insurgency failed, largely, as will be seen, owing to external intervention against the regime. Once that happened, civil war, morphing into proxy war, became the default mode.

Two dynamics drove toward civil war: escalation of violence, plus, territorial contestation. Escalation of tit-for-tat violence was inexorable. The opposition strategy depended on a level and scale of protests that the security services would be stretched thin and exhausted, perhaps so provoked they would increase violence that would turn a majority of the population

against the regime, or split it internally and especially lead to such disaffection in the army that it would become an unreliable instrument of repression. Indeed, as the regime failed to contain the protests at one level of violence, it increased the level—killing many protesters, provoking the turn to armed resistance by the opposition.

The opposition also knew that it could not win without breaking the alignment between the regime and urban elites: it attempted via bombings and armed infiltrations of the cities to undermine the economy and security in pro-government areas. A further watershed in intensification of the conflict was its spread to Aleppo where the opposition escalated the fight, infiltrating and seizing half of the city, to demonstrate that the upper and middle classes would not remain immune to the violence. In the summer of 2012, battles in Aleppo drew in increasing numbers of jihadist fighters. There followed the destruction of large parts of Syrian's industrial base and looting on a massive scale as whole factories were dismantled and exported to Turkey.

The opposition also believed that the threat of external intervention would force the regime to refrain from bringing its full military advantage to bear—or if it did so, that such intervention would be provoked, as had happened with Qaddafi. Indeed, anti-regime activists, including Syrian expatriates who were instrumental in initiating and internationalising the uprising, understood that they could not succeed without external intervention, at least enough to restrain the regime's repressive options. External activists told those on the ground, pointing to the Libya no-fly zone, that "the international community won't sit and watch you be killed" (Seelye 2011). They claimed that another Hama was not possible because "Everything is being filmed on YouTube and there's a lot of international attention on the Middle East" (Seelye 2011). Although the regime did avoid the inflammatory use of violent rhetoric that had invited intervention against Qaddafi, it quietly and incrementally increased the use of violence from a "security solution" to a "military solution." The move toward a military solution in which heavy weapons were used in built-up urban areas appears partly to have been a response to the killing of over a hundred government soldiers and police in the Islamist stronghold of Jisr ash-Shughur in June 2011 and also a bid to prevent establishment of "liberated areas" that would facilitate Western intervention on behalf of the opposition, as had happened in Libya.

Increased government violence did stimulate increased military defections: not of whole units, hence not threatening the regime's core, but enough individual defections that, combined with the external provision of safe havens (in Turkey) and external arming, enabled the construction of the "Free Syrian Army." At the same time, the incremental depletion of the government's military manpower debilitated its capacity to secure territory. As the government lost its monopoly of violence, so did territorial contestation increase and it gradually withdrew from the far east of the country leaving much of the country's grain-growing areas and oil resources to opposition factions. In parallel, high levels of violence drove the jihadisation of the anti-government Sunni rural underclass, which, together with the trans-state movement of non-Syrian militants into Syria, empowered jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham) and Ahrar al-Sham. Their greater fighting prowess put the government on the defensive.

However, it is likely that without the external factor government counter-insurgency might have prevailed (Phillips 2016). It was, indeed, competitive external interference that *tipped* the country into a failed state. Opposition insurgency was enabled by the copious flows of arms and financing from the Arab Gulf to support fighters, by the safe haven provided by Turkey which also allowed the transit of foreign fighters and helped organise anti-government forces, and by game changing anti-tank weaponry that neutralised the government's counter-insurgency military advantage. Once the regime looked in danger of crumbling, counter-intervention by Iran, Hezbollah, and later Russia blocked an opposition victory, with the result being stalemate up until 2017. This "balanced intervention" was decisive in the prolongation of the conflict since it obstructed various attempts to broker a compromise settlement by UN mediators: each side believed that it could win if its external patrons increased support. Patrons did provide clients enough support to keep fighting, driving an inexorable increase in the *level* of violence, hence, state failure.

Features of State Failure

The idea of state failure implies that *either* government-guaranteed order exists or anarchy reigns; but there are *degrees* of state failure and forms of non-state governance. In Syria two opposite dynamics took place in parallel: the territorial fragmentation of authority and attempts to re-establish it over broader territories. As path dependency would suggest, in an authority vacuum, agents try to reproduce power building practices—charismatic movements, patrimonial governance—that had historically "worked" in the creation of MENA states.

Governance Fragmentation, Security Dilemma

One feature of state failure in Syria was the territorial fragmentation of governance as authority, particularly but not exclusively in opposition-controlled areas, was fragmented among local neighbourhoods and warlord fiefdoms. This was accompanied by a *security dilemma* (Posen 1993): the breakdown of order led to some high-profile sectarian massacres, like Ishtabraq and Houla, generating a fear of the "other" at the grassroots level; many people came to depend on their communal group and neighbourhoods for security as these formed local defence militias on both sides of the conflict. This tendency was accelerated by the breakdown, in many areas, of the normal economy by which the various parts of the country had been integrated; in its place, people, unable to make a normal living, sought survival through spoils or joined armed bands led by local warlords competing to tax economic flows and take cuts of external resources.

Competitive Regime Formation

Parallel to this, however, a counter-process was underway: "competitive regime formation" under which actors on both sides attempted to reconstitute or reconfigure authority over wider areas. Chiefly, the al-Asad government and the Islamist-led opposition competed to fill the Syrian space.

The al-Asad regime reconfigured itself to survive the conflict into a much more *coercive* and *exclusivist* but also *decentralised* form of neopatrimonialism. The core of the regime, centred around the al-Asad family, security services, and elite army units, contracted as all those not committed to its hardline view of the opposition were marginalised and power re-centred on those in command of violence.

The core's main loyalist base was the Alawi sect, absorbed *en masse* into the army and security apparatus, living in uniformly Alawi suburbs. Implicated in regime crimes, suffering high casualties, facing existential threat if the government collapsed, it had no viable option to defect, even though there was a lot of resentment at the regime for its failure to defend the community and a growing unwillingness to fight outside Alawi areas. The regular army, on the other hand, had been downsized from manpower shortages and reconfigured for counter-insurgency; defections stopped but performance was highly variable, and, with some elite units aside, the army often appeared unable to stand up to jihadists. Notably, it

still incorporated Sunnis who enjoyed upward mobility through military careers and identified with the army.

Parallel to the fragmentation in opposition territories, in the government areas, too, there was a decentralisation of power to locales; as the regular army contracted, pro-government communities assumed their own self-defence, in a process of "militia-isation." Some amounted to "weaponised" clientele networks headed by pro-government businessmen-patrons; some were self-financing through protection rackets and extortion. Although an effort was made to organise these local forces into a centrally directed National Defence Force, centre-periphery relations had changed: bureaucratic command gave way to the tissue of personal and clientele loyalties and bargaining (material incentives, threats) vis-à-vis armed "fiefdoms."

In parallel, however, the regime attempted to preserve the "state"— that is, the bureaucracy. Government-controlled areas included two-thirds of the population and, indicative of a still partly functioning public sector, were less afflicted by education and health deficits compared to opposition areas. Even in opposition areas, the government retained a shadow presence, with Damascus continuing to pay salaries of state employees in such areas. Services, such as provision of passports and educational exams, were still under state control, forcing people to travel from opposition-controlled countryside to government-controlled provincial capitals for such services; many also moved into government-controlled areas because of the greater security there, and since these migrants included many Sunnis, there was, ironically, a sectarian diversification in government-controlled areas, notably Damascus, but also minority-dominated areas such as Latakia and Tartous provinces. However, as, over time, resources at the command of the government became scarcer, benefits, such as state jobs, were increasingly confined to proven loyalists.[1]

In opposition-controlled territories, the most robust counter-regime builders have been the salafist-jihadist movements such as Jabhat al-Nusra (known today as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham), Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS. These took forms that would have been recognisable to Ibn Khaldun: charismatic leaders professing radical Islamist ideologies and leading armed movements with some bureaucratic capabilities. Their greater ideological self-discipline compared to corrupt Free Syrian Army (FSA) warlords enabled them to provide a more robust governance, although their attempts at state-building was obstructed by their frequent rivalry, often degenerating into armed conflict, notably between ISIS and

other jihadists. They varied in how far they prioritised a trans-state caliphate, as did ISIS, or only the overthrow of al-Asad and Islamisation of the Syrian state, the goal of Ahrar al-Sham. But all were highly exclusionary of any who did not profess their fundamentalist version of Islam and in the areas they governed their harsh puritanical rule tended over time to alienate the population (Abboud 2016: 175–178; ICG 2013: 11–15; Lund 2013a).

Squeezed between the government and the jihadists were the remnants of the Local Coordinating Council activists, grouped with FSA elements and traditional notables, often governing through elected councils. Governance was highly fragmented, ineffectual, and marginalised by warlords or targeted by regime bombing and food sieges (Abboud 2016: 77; ICG 2013; Ali 2015).

Trans-state Spillover and State Remaking

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts were, from the outset, intertwined and over time became increasingly so, symptomatic of shared trans-state identities. When the US destroyed the Iraqi state in its 2003 invasion, Syrian tribes crossed into Iraq to join their kin in resistance to the US occupation; when Syria self-destructed, Iraqi tribes joined those in Syria rebelling against the government. Eastern Syria and West Iraq, where central governments lost control, became breeding grounds of trans-state jihadists, intertwined with tribal fighters (who had always seen the borders as artificial). Sectarian militias, whether ISIS fighters or Shia militias, moved back and forth as the two states became a single arena of battle.

Although the majority of Iraqis and Syrians continued to support the integrity of their state borders, armed minorities took advantage of states' loss of territorial control to advance border remaking agendas. Kurds, denied a state at the foundation of the states system, gave rise in Syria to a movement, the PYD, that sought, at a minimum, federalisation and self-governance comparable to the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Some aimed to forge a new Kurdistan via their trans-state links across Syria, Turkey, and Iraq (Stanfield 2013).

The spectacular rise of the most visible irredentist movement, ISIS, can only be understood as a function of the interaction of external intervention and state failure in the Levant space. It was the US invasion of Iraq, dismantling the Ba'athist state, that created the authority vacuum enabling the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq ("AQI"). ISIS was born out of an

amalgamation of AQI with ex-Iraqi Ba'athists (displaced by the US invasion) and tribal supporters (trained and armed by the US in the late 2000s but marginalised by the Shia-dominated Baghdad government). ISIS flourished in a vacuum of state failure: its financial and military resources were seized from the failing Iraqi and Syrian states. Its claim to protect Sunnis and to provide a modicum of order in place of these failed states was very plausible. Particularly attractive to its fighters was the idea of a revived caliphate in place of the Versailles-imposed Westphalian system: ISIS famously claimed to abolish Sykes-Picot, that is, the "artificial" Syrian-Iraqi border. Indeed, the undoing of "Sykes-Picot," in many ways the root origins of the region's intractable turmoil, is no longer unthinkable (Hassan 2014; Itani 2014).

Conclusion

External imposition of a flawed regional states system constituted a structure that narrowed options for state-building by indigenous leaders. Ba'athist state-builders in Syria and Iraq finally found what appeared to be a robust hybrid formula, a populist version of neo-patrimonialism that combined Khaldunian practices—asabiyya—with modern bureaucracy, semi-Leninist party organisation and revolution from above. But these states had built-in flaws that, in the right conditions—a combination of internal rebellion and external intervention—would lead to state deformation, beginning with the US invasion of Iraq and deepened by state failure in Syria.

It was never inevitable that the Syrian uprising would end in a failed state since agents had choices at each juncture, even though path dependency might have made it seem to them that none of their choices were good ones. In Syria, non-violent protest could have led to a compromise transition had hardliners not hijacked the leadership on both sides: for them compromise seemed more risky than pursuit of their zero-sum pathways. Although the opposition sought in the name of making a revolution from below, to match and overtake the government's violence, the social structure and regime survival strategies blocked the bandwagoning mobilisation against the government that this required. Neither could the government, once it lost its monopoly of violence, wage a successful counter-insurgency in the face of external backing for an increasingly effective jihadist opposition. War became the default mode: the outcome, a failed state, created a new structural situation—security dilemma, author-

ity fragmentation—in which competitive state formation by regime and jihadists sought each to fill the Syrian space (or even to merge it in a larger arena of battle) but ended up locked into a stalemate up until 2017. The equilibrium point reached was at much higher levels of violence than hitherto in which any distinction between combatants and non-combatants melted away in a particularly pernicious version of the current era's "new wars."

NOTE

1. The analysis of the regime's adaptation is based on Khaddour (2015a, b), Lund (2013b, 2015), and Samaha (2017).

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