

The Levant Reconciling a Century of Contradictions

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Although the revolution in Syria is unfolding within the modern political boundaries of this country, its proper understanding is not attainable without putting it in a larger historical context, which includes the adjacent geographical areas of the Levant, Bilad al-Sham. Without such a broader view, the appreciation of the complexity of the Syrian case is not possible, nor accounting for its consequences and anticipating its future.

Probably, in no case, is the mess of colonial legacy more visible than it is in Syria. The pathway of this legacy marks the future development of the country, and its implications are facing the revolution today with arduous challenges. The complexity of the Syria case is not limited to the political dimension; it is also complex at the meta-cultural level. Furthermore, the change in Syria has consequences for the region as whole – it will institutionalize the Arab Spring as an unavoidable political force, and it will energize the process of cultural reformation and the recovery of a civilizational Muslim identity.

I will first examine the historical background of the region and the outcome of the colonial legacy in Arab countries, which has furnished two paths of political and social development. Second, I will examine the Syria-specific conditions that formed its political system, including the early military entry into politics. Third, I will elaborate on the cultural deprecation that the majority of the population feels. Fourth, I will discuss politics and the arrival of dictatorship, highlighting its social basis and putting it in a regional context. Fifth, I will shed light on Islamic activism and then provide a summary of the revolutionary reality on the ground. Lastly, I will discuss geopolitical factors that make the case of the Syrian revolution highly complex.

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The Historical Backdrop

Few major civilizations of the Old World did not cross the land of what is known today as Syria. The Levant or Bilad al-Sham, are terms that I will use instead of the “Middle East.” The terms point to plains that “have been both prize and passageway for conquerors from both the east and the west for millennia.”¹ Today’s Syria was once part of the Sassanid Empire and the Roman Empire. The Phoenicians of the first millennium BC and the third century AC queen of the Palmyrene Empire, who led a famous revolt against the Roman Empire, left landmarks on the Syrian soil – but it was the Islamic civilization that left its mark on the soul of Bilad al-Sham because for centuries it was at the heart of the Muslim order that stretched from the Atlantic in the west to the borders of China in the east, with Damascus, Syria as the capitol of the Umayyad rule. It was also the land that went under the control of Muhammad Ali of Egypt, until the Ottomans pushed back again. In the modern times, the Levant represented the Arab gateway to the Istana, the center of the Ottoman Empire.

Contemporary Syria was always part of something larger and at the center of it. Modern Syria is an invention, and its current international borders are super artificial. Yes, there were Assyrians and other ancient populations who built famous civilizations. However, those were local civilizations and did not form political units with delimited borders that correspond by natural geographical boundaries. This birthplace of many civilizations did not form a continuous political unit similar to what we can speak of Egypt, for example. Furthermore, being at the crossroad of migration waves for centuries, the population diversity in Syria cannot speak of one aboriginal group.

Before the formation of modern Syria, the area was part of the Ottoman Empire. A quick examination of some major developments that took place in the empire is highly relevant to understanding the early development of the Arab region, especially Greater Syria (and Egypt). Three developments were specifically consequential: military reform, bureaucratic reform, and reorientation in the education of the elite. Those developments were intertwined, and surely represent top challenges of modernity. The administration of the Ottoman Empire became cognizant of the rise of European powers, who were either chipping away some of the empire’s territories or forcing it to make concessions that were unthinkable before. If the Ottoman Empire was specifically distinguished in its administrative ability and military capacity, it is those two aspects that became visibly challenged in the late nineteenth century. While the image of stagnation is popularly assigned to the late Ottoman era, one may observe that the Ottoman ad-

ministration, in fact, experimented with many types of reform. The reforms might have not worked because they were considerably inconsistent with the unique system of the empire. It is this bind that gripped the empire – that is, there was a definite need for change, yet, the nature of attempted changes conflicted with the operative mandates of the system.

Two reform decrees were pointedly important to the Arab region: the *Hatt-i Sharif* of Gulhane (1839) and the *Islahat Fermani* (1856). Such “liberal” reforms were intended to recast the Ottoman identity (*osmanlilik*) in a way that the equality of citizens is maintained, or more accurately, reshaped to accommodate the spirit of modernity. Ironically, such policies were unsatisfactory, if not inflammatory, to both the Muslim majority and non-Muslim minorities. For example, Christians were exempt from military service; however, the reform cancels this advantage that was reinstated against a fee. As James Gelvin put it: “It is thus ironic that the policy of promising equality to all inhabitants of the empire, regardless of religious affiliation, hardened communal boundaries and precipitated instances of intercommunal violence. In the process, it created the distinctly modern phenomenon of sectarianism all too familiar to observers of the contemporary Middle East.”² Minority advantage was also structurally introduced in economic affairs. As the Ottoman economic system became more integrated with the world economy, Christians merchants acted as middlemen in trading with Europe, so did Jewish merchants but to a lesser degree. Granted that those minorities had linguistic advantage, but more importantly, they were granted *berats* by European consulates. *Berats* were part of the capitulatory agreements between the Ottoman Empire and European parties, giving Ottoman citizens the advantages extended to merchants of European states in the form of lower custom duties and tax breaks.³ In trying to strike a balance between global powers, the Ottomans often offered what were called “capitulations” to Britain and France to buy their support. These might have been needed maneuvers. However, late in the game, it is obvious that they became a liability. And these advantages facilitated the fragmentation of Bilad al-Sham, the house of many of those who benefited from the capitulations.

Culture and the Collective Identity

The Arab Spring and the Syrian revolution were more than political upheavals, adjustments to the restructuring of the global economy, or the materialization of regional power realignments. To be sure, those are factors that impinge on the revolutions and represent structural constraints that both affect their shape and dictate the range of possible outcomes. Never-

theless, the Arab Spring rested on deep-rooted seeds in which collective identities are anchored and cultural visions are formed. I can only briefly touch on this subject, and going back to the end of the Ottoman time is a good starting point.

The post-Ottoman era represented the formal arrival of modernity to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, which entered through the social, economic, and political conditions that the colonial power created or facilitated. Within such context, we can conceive of two paths of development of the modern Arab states: the sultanic path and the cosmopolitan path. The sultanic path was championed by elites who had local legitimacy and kept, or constructed a pseudo-Islamic mantel of governance, while the cosmopolitan path sought modern and nationalistic anchors for their legitimacy. Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, and Yemen went through the sultanic path. Except for Morocco, those countries were not directly colonized; some of them even did not exist before as separate political entities, rather, they were created in the shadow of colonial powers (specifically Britain). Not being directly colonized (Aden of Yemen was ruled by Britain) does not mean they did not develop within the new colonial world order. Morocco represented a unique case for being formally colonized and not being once part of Ottoman Empire. Other Arab countries – Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq – went into a more direct form of colonization. We can detect two patterns in that regard. The conditions of the countries that were not directly colonized allowed traditional elites to continue leading, somewhat smoothly, while colonized countries had to construct a totally new political order, very much paralleled by significance social realignments. The difference between the nature of British and French colonial control here is not insignificant. The French policies of assimilation in North Africa had very significant cultural consequences.

Although not true for all cases, it is safe to say that countries that were more intellectually vibrant followed the second path of constructing a modern state along the model of the colonial power that seized control of their country before independence. Generally speaking, the question of Arab national identity became salient in the post-Ottoman era. While the first path maintained a conservative national identity, posed as “Islamic,” countries of the cosmopolitan path raised an overt Arab nationalist identity, anti-Ottomanic and anti-Islamic in some cases, along with considerable elements of secular liberalism. Obviously, Palestine represented a special case as it was recolonized by a religio-national political order that claimed ancient historical rights to the area (discussing the wider consequences of the establishment of Israel is beyond this essay).

What is specifically intriguing, and calls for clear explanation, is that Bilad al-Sham remained the most diverse in this Muslim region. Except for Egypt that has 5-percent Coptic Christians,⁴ the Arab North African countries had a near complete Muslim population (Sudan minus the south is almost all Muslim). So, the case is with Turkey and Iran. The emerging picture then is that old Muslim centers had high religious diversity, while those living in the surrounding land were almost all Muslims. Furthermore, Egypt had no further divisions, and all of its population is squarely Egyptian. But Syria is a mosaic of a more than a dozen small religious and ethnic groups. If we only consider major groups, we can say that the majority is comprised of Arabs (90 percent), and the Kurds represent the largest non-Arab minority. And if we consider Syria and Lebanon together, the share of Christians in the population goes up while the share of the Alawite goes down.⁵ If we include Jordan and the Iskenderun area that is now part of Turkey, the share of Alawites might stay close to their current rate of around 10 percent, while that of Christians shrinks to 5 percent or less (depending on if we count Christian expatriates or not).

The designation of the term *Alawite* should be taken with care. Technically, it refers to a religious designation as the Alawite sect that branched off from Seveners in the third century AH, who in turn had departed in the middle of the second century AH from the Shī'ah branch that maintained the core of Islamic beliefs and practices.⁶ In terms of theology, the Nusairi sect, which goes now with the name of Alawite, is a syncretistic theology containing an amalgam of Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian elements. However, it is not helpful to think of the Alawite as a religious group; rather, it stands for an ethnic group of a special folk religion. Indeed, the Nusairi sect did not develop an extensive theological literature, and few religious scholars were prominent among them, due to the relative small size of the sect. More importantly, the average Alawite today is not versed in religious meanings beyond what a folk religion offers: a symbolic collective identity with minimal normative directives. The lifestyle and the mundane conditions under which the Alawite lived are much more significant in the modern history of the Alawite. This can explain the relative ease of declaring themselves as Shī'ah at one point, and being declared by politicians as Muslims at the time of the independence. Nevertheless, the religious designation is a highly important marker, especially in the time of conflict, even if it has little substance.

Post-colonial political developments were coupled with intellectual trends as the new nation-states tried to forge national identities. The idea of Arabism became attractive, and it can be compared against Turkic na-

tionalism. The nationalistic organization of Young Turks had its mirrors in Arab countries, especially in the larger Syria and Egypt (also Iraq). But what Arabism mean is another question. Its meaning was wide in scope and ranged from that of a dimension within an Islamic outlook stressing the central role of Arabs in Muslim history – to that of the nationalism of specific countries and the imagined communities rooted in a nation-state framework.

Syrian and Lebanese Christians, as well as immigrants from those communities who lived in Europe and the Americas, were specifically prominent in promoting the discourse of nationalism. The discourse of the nationalist was riddled with irreconcilable ideas, and the outlook of an “Arab nationalism minus Islam” was destined to degenerate to a state-specific nationalism. This dilemma was sharper among the minorities, since any social polity larger than those fragments envisioned by the colonial power puts the minorities in a less visible place in a Muslim ocean. Thus, different minorities attempted to construct historical aboriginal identities. If a Coptic identity has high relevance to its Christian adherence in Egypt, for Muslims, a Pharonic identity has no resonance. Similarly was the case of a Phoenician identity in Greater Syria. Indeed, pre-Islamic identity anchors were mainly entertained by non-Muslim groups. Even the Maronite minority of the Mount of Lebanon, which happily adopted such ancient claim to identity, could not disparage a religious component that went with it. Ironically, such religious component is not of the religion of those assumed Phoenician ancestors, but a religion indigenous to the area, which nevertheless has connections to the specific colonizer of Lebanon – Catholicism. Such an identity can directly conflict with the larger Arab of Muslim identity if constructed as the aboriginal identity of the region, a region that is empirically dominated by an Arab human stock and a Muslim rule.

For the Coptic of Egypt, the Maronite of Lebanon, and the Assyrian of Syria and Iraq, the very Arab belonging has the potential of becoming imbued with Muslim cultural elements – thus, it had to be outright rejected or at least inspected. The alternative anchors of collective identities are comprised of a mixture of three elements: secular ideas and unqualified acceptance of European modernity, state-specific local sentiments and cultural traits, and a religious set of meanings and belonging (a special Eastern Orthodox belonging in the case of Copts, a special East Roman Catholic belonging in the case of the Maronite, and a mainstream Orthodox Church belonging for the Assyrians, plus other religious groups such as the Armenians and the Protestant).

The identity tensions for such People of the Book groups were different from the identity tensions of the Muslim offshoot groups of the Ala-

wite, Druze, and Ismā'īli in Syria. While both rejected Muslim culture and what brings with it of ties, the Christian minorities showed a clear fascination with the West, while the offshoot Muslim groups exhibited a strong attraction to the idea of Arab nationalism. However, Arabicity is bound to bring with it Islam, or at least Muslimness. This drove the Syrian sects toward an emphasis on Syrian, not pan-Arab nationalism, similar to what Christian minorities ended up with. It should be noted, however, that for the average Alawite or Druze, local culture, a village culture, and a folk religion represented their lived experiences. And such an existence perpetuates their marginality. Therefore, they were left to choose between a marginality whose basis had eroded after the eclipse of the Millet system, or a new nationalism rooted in newly created nation-state, intermingled with Arabic content. Therefore, the direction of the Alawite, the Druze, and probably the Ismā'īli, vacillated between an Arab nationalism and a narrower Syrian nationalism, but the larger identification necessarily brings with it scary Islamic shadows.

Later on in the 1950s, Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser became the beacon of Arabism. Also, socialism became very attractive after the independence of colonial powers, as was the case in many African and Latin American countries that were parts of the exploited Third World. However, Arab nationalism has never been able to clarify its content. As we will see, the Arab Spring repositioned Arabism within a larger Islamic context, and that was particularly the case in the Syrian revolution, in which the awareness that the Islamic component of the national identity had been denied and violated for nearly half of a century.

The discourse of the Arab secular elite today still struggles with the Islamic backdrop of the region. In the last few decades, strands within the Arab nationalist discourse reformulated its ideas to recognize the Muslim civilizational milieu, recasting it in an Arab framework. For the majority of Syrians, the Sunnis, undermining the Islamic background of the region is nothing but a betrayal of their historical identity and that of the larger Arab region with which they increasingly find common ties and sentiments. The Arab Spring sharpened holders of such an identity and contrasted them directly to the secular regimes bent on purging such identity anchors.

Grievances and Polarizations

All politics are social at base, and the current turmoil in Syria has deep social roots. The old social order of Syria was experiencing tremendous stress. The role of family notables, the ulama, and the sheikhs of mosques were forcefully shaken by the larger forces of colonization and modernity.

The stance of non-Muslim minorities and their political preferences intensified such pressures.

Marginal groups in societies usually pay the highest price when the political and economic systems come under stress, and that is exactly what happened in the colonial period and right after it. Generally speaking, rural areas were in a bad shape in the early days of independence in Syria, and the modernist developmental plans then did give those areas due attention. Such a situation created incentives for aspiring Sunnis in rural areas to first hail Nasserism and then to get attracted to socialism of the Ba'ath Party. But there were extra complications for other national groups, the Kurds, and the Muslim offshoot groups.

Becoming detached from Turkey and passing through the colonial period did not simply stand as political change; rather it represented a historical juncture, at which attempts were made to change the whole direction of the country and its very basis. The Millet system, despite all criticism, allowed ample spaces for ethnic realities to unfold. The Kurds lived in their undisputed land for centuries, and the Millet system allowed them to live their local culture and administer themselves. After that, the non-Arabs found themselves in a vacuum. The Kurdish disfranchisement in Syria became more acute in the early 1960s after the intensification of Arab nationalism. With the arrival of the Ba'ath in 1963, a large number of them, specifically those who live in the northeast of the country, were denationalized. Most ordinary Kurds share with other Sunnis their religious orientation. However, in terms of a political identity, Kurds represent a classic case of nationalism, an imaginary identity connected to a specific land and rich memories. Furthermore, their case in the Syrian context is an anomaly since it is related to the larger issue of Kurdistan, a geographical area that stretched beyond the boundaries of Syria. Communist ideas formed the core of the radical Kurdish organizations, but popular sentiments revolve mainly around the allegiance to traditional leadership.

The position of the Muslim offshoot sects represent a different story. As acknowledged by many historians, the Islamic civilization showed high levels of tolerance toward the other, especially toward the People of the Book. But Islamic theological positions and the political arrangements that Muslims devised were less accommodative to minorities that cannot be classified as People of the Book or do not have extensive scriptural writings. That was especially true for groups that were considered deviant offshoots of Islam itself. The Alawite and the Druze in the larger Syria fit this suspect category of syncretism. The Alawites arrived to the Syrian coastal area a long time ago, while the Druze lived in a mountainous area in the

south of the country. Self-segregation, discrimination, and developmental plans kept them away from the urban prosperous centers. Ironically, isolating themselves was both a necessary means to maintain group identity and a source of continuous marginalization. During the Assad regime, many of them moved to cities, such as Homs and Damascus, and were handed governmental positions based simply on the sect they belonged to with total disregard of qualifications – thus, putting them in a place of more conditions for conflict.

In summary, the colonial legacy and the challenges of the early independence era created conditions in which the offshoot Muslim minorities were eager to exploit and ready to project their grievances. We can recall that the British colonial strategy focused on putting in place structural impediments that spell disaster in the future, largely in drawing national boundaries that are not compatible with the realities on the ground. The French strategy focused more on disturbing the cultural basis of the colonized. Syria was inflicted with both strategies. Indeed, the French colonial project heightened the sense of grievances among Syrian minorities and groomed some of their leaders. The Christian minorities who become economically advantaged continued their journey of success in a culture that values entrepreneurialism, and thus the Christian minorities escaped from being marginalized or disliked. The Kurds became the forgotten disadvantaged group; although the larger population did not resent them, their basic needs were not attended to. The internal contradictions in Syria were not simply ethnic or sectarian. At this point, it is worth noting that one of the early Syrian presidents was a Kurd, and that the Christian, Faris al-Khori, a legendary leader, was once the prime minister of Syria.

After Independence

The State of Syria with its current boundaries is a modern construction. Indeed, before World War II, there was no Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, or Palestine as independent nation-states. The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) between Britain and France created the current boundaries. Mosul of Iraq was considered once part of Syria today. The fragmentation of the heart of the Muslim land, Bilad al-Sham is well known. The land of new Syria was further truncated; Lebanon to the southwest was carved out, as well as Iskenderun to the northeast (now part of Turkey). This deprived the new Syria from a large coastal stretch of significant economic and strategic value. To the northeast of today's Syria, part of the historical Kurdistan was incorporated in Syria, while the rest was divided between Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The project of fragmenting the area went along with implanting

Israel between the two lungs of the center of the old Muslim world, Egypt and Bilad al-Sham.

New political formations could very well manage the newly created boundaries and march toward a new future. However, that usually occurs when two conditions were satisfied: the new political formation succeeds in national development and raising the standards of living, and it succeeds in maintaining stability in the international political order. None of that was possible in the case of Syria. The historical argument above was not that of a romantic revival of memories; rather, it was a prelude to structural and cultural alignments. It is about a political design that left open wounds in real life, wounds that materialize at the level of economics and politics. Saying that, there is also no doubt that half of a century of the new political arrangements in Levant satellite countries was long enough to sharpen specific national identities. Furthermore, those countries, not geopolitically viable in themselves, had to create their own dependencies to be able to survive. Obviously, these dependencies were formed with the old colonial powers, creating a zigzag of dependencies and embedding internationally induced hostilities between old neighbors. In this, the relationships of Syria with its new neighbors were abnormal: rivalry with Lebanon that does not have enough bases of national sovereignty; enmity with Jordan, the British ally; competition and enmity with the more resourceful Iraq; and near existential threat from its borders with Israel.

The above dynamics explain the bumpy political road that Syria went through, which led the country into the current abyss. New smaller Syria won its independence from France in 1946. Of the sixty-five years since then and until the eruption of the revolution, Syria lived forty-eight years under solid dictatorship. The seventeen years under civilian governments were not free of military pressures and of the managing by more powerful international actors – the Hashemite/Iraqi axis and the Egyptian-Saudi axis. Nevertheless, there was a big measure of rationality in Syrian politics, and those who led the country then were the cultured cream at the top of the society, many of which were educated in the West, mostly in France.

Post-independent Syria witnessed a series of short-lived coups led by military generals. The first Syrian coup, and the first coup in Arab countries, was led by al-Zaim. It is widely believed that this coup was CIA sponsored, as the president immediately signed on a softer position toward Israel and allowed the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), considered then a Western interest, to pass from Iraq to a Syrian port. This regime lasted a few months, and the popular anecdote points to an eccentric military man insulting the American ambassador only to cost himself the office. Such coups reflected the political restlessness of Syrians at the time, and

the regimes they brought were weak and did not have oppressive capacities. The political turbulence expressed overly ambitious Syria looking for change. The early Syrian political system adopted presidential democracy, and there was a respected parliament, regular voting, and handing down of power peacefully.

The unification with Egypt was a watershed event. People in Syria cried with happiness and danced in the streets after merging with Egypt in 1958. This “unity period,” lasted less than four years. The regime was inaugurated by the suspension of the activities of all political parties. For the proud Syrians in major cities, this unity quickly turned into the imposition of Egyptian bureaucracy over the Syrian national will, the humiliation of the Syrian army, and the intimidation of ordinary people by the intelligent forces spying on them and introducing systematic torture. This unity period also brought the nationalization of large economic enterprises, only to retard industries that were thriving. Also some land redistribution was put in effect. All of this was done under a socialist guise and as service for the cause of peasants and labor. As much as those “reforms” were hated in major cities, they were admired in smaller towns and rural areas. The unity period also brought electricity and running water to some villages. Significant numbers of Syrians became ideologically Nasserite, which later gave birth to the Nasserite Party in Syria. Nasserism accentuated class conflict, mainly a rural-urban conflict, and paved the way for socialist ideas. Ambivalence toward Nasserism still lingers in Syria.

Bourgeoning Society with an Edge

The young independent Syria had all the marks of success. It was led by learned personalities who came from prominent families drawn from the major cities – namely, Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The aspiration to a European style government and society, and more specifically the French, cannot be missed. The influence of French intellectuality is still evident even today. Like other newly independent states of the hemispheric South, the ideas of progress and catching up with the West were unquestionable common sense.

Post-independence confidence drove quality institutions to emerge; for example, the University of Damascus quickly became a reputable educational institution internationally recognized for its rigor. The culture of entrepreneurialism led to economic growth that was relatively diversified. Agriculture secured the food basket of the nation and exported some fine products. Light industry focused on textile, basic medicine, cement, and some other basics, in addition to consumables. Some relatively large in-

dustrial firms offered shares to be traded publically. Skilful craftsmanship insured near self-sufficiency in serving practical needs, from fixing machines to tailoring durable furniture. Active trade served other needs, and more importantly, connected Syria to the rest of the world.

Development on the cultural front was specifically significant. Similar to other newly independent Arab-speaking states, Arabism loomed large in the Syrian imagination. Arabism – the sense of unifying Arabs across their lands – was an irresistible dream that was contiguous at the time of the Ottomans and became fragmented at the end of the era of direct colonialism. The establishment of Israel in the heart of the Muslim-Arab land stamped the national consciousness with the sense of a colonial project that betrays the very identity of the region and conspires against its essential interests. With the rise of President Nasser in Egypt, Arabism inflamed the imagination of Arab inhabitants (now more than 300 million) whose land stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east. Syrian intelligentsia made Syria a major Arab hub. The Academy for Arabic Language, whose mission was to preserve and adapt Arabic language in a changing world, was formed in Damascus before its counterpart in Cairo. Syria enthusiastically sent teachers of Arabic language to newly independent Algeria to counter the French effort of erasing the Arabic language there. The mood of Syria was surely nationalistically Arab – proud, determined, idealistic, though not radical. The idealism of Syrian Arabism reached its zenith in a rare event in the history of politics. In 1958, the highly respectful President of Syria, Shukri al-Quwatly, stepped down from his position to form a new state, the United Arab Republic, that joined Syria and Egypt and was headed by the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The basis of discontent was much more complex. And the picture of a vibrant post-independence middle-class society could be sharply contrasted to a different picture in small towns, villages, and rural areas. Not only did big city centers exploit the economic fragility of the agriculture at the national periphery, they also did not extend to its population due respect, for such population did not fit the new Western model of a modern society which the city dwellers were enthused about.

Politics under Ideological Dictatorship

It was rather impressive that Syria in the seventeen years after independence was able to prosper. Despite the scarcity of natural resources, Syrian entrepreneurialism managed to make the country reasonably developed. This happened even as many hands changed in politics, some of which involved bloodless military interventions in politics. However, these po-

litical maneuverings were almost irrelevant to the ordinary people, as they continued their incessant quest for a better living, something at which they were adept. In this period, there was a parliament, political competition, and most important of all, a bottom line of rationality in governance. Such state of affairs stands in stark difference with the political reality after the 1963 Ba'ath Party coup. The logic in politics shifted from pragmatism to ideology, an Arab nationalist socialist ideology. From day one, the party put in place a Stalinist political system. The new system concentrated all powers in the Ba'ath revolutionary movement, and its bureaucracy.

The Ba'ath Socialist Party captured power in the 1963 military coup that exploited a power vacuum and eccentric political competition. Armed with a leftist revolutionary ideology, a totalitarian political system was put in place. An increasingly oppressive military regime led the country, and earlier, the Ba'ath and Nasserite nationalist thinkers were left with the choice of rationalizing revolutionary oppression or fleeing out of the country for their safety. The Ba'ath program changed.

Although Syria did not have large industrial enterprises or landownership of vast land, the Ba'ath continued the path of nationalization. This resulted in a decline in agricultural vitality and a near collapse of Syrian industries, now overstaffed with ruling party loyalists who had no experience in what they were put in charge of. The Ba'ath party went into significant internal struggles. First, it shifted left, seeking a more purely Marxian model of society. This shift was sponsored by military generals who usurped power and exercised ugly practices of oppression. Even within the governing elites, the internal struggle witnessed unspeakable viciousness; the first truly socialist president spent twenty-two years in prison.

The Ba'ath Party considered the early democratic political structure of Syria as merely a reflection of the interests of a privileged middle class. The three main intellectuals of the Ba'ath Party, all Sorbonne graduates, deeply believed in progress and in secular Arab nationalism, a vision that developed into a revolutionary leftist ideology. It is important to note that the major thinkers of the Ba'ath party included Zaki al-Arsuzi, Michel Aflaq, and Salah al-Din Bitar – who respectively had Alawite, Christian, and Muslim backgrounds. What was common among the nationalist intellectuals was a secular vision, and the religious backgrounds of the nationalists was only nominal; nevertheless, this was not unimportant because such backgrounds signified identity tensions at the micro familial and social level, which was reflected at the macro national level and the vision for the country.

The Marxist ideal of a comprehensive revolution that reflected the thought of Aflaq, the Lenin of the three intellectuals, asserted two prin-

ciples: “revolutionary socialism,” and the “party of minority elite” – both which were necessary to counter the backward bourgeoisie structure. The civilian leadership of the Ba’ath readily sought the military, staffed by many of their members, to achieve the revolutionary goals.⁷ Theoretically, as Article 8 of the constitution stated, the Syrian political system was to be run exclusively under the political and social leadership of the Ba’ath Party. Practically, and after the leftist party went through intense infighting that included the brutal elimination of rivalries within, the political system increasingly became a system run by the security forces. The single anchor of legitimacy became that of being able to suppress with a vengeance.

The rise of the Ba’ath party was part of a military coup, and the two minorities, the Alawite and the Druze, had significant power in the military. The Ba’ath controlled the state bureaucracy, backed up by specific leaders in the military, and the relationship between the party and the military was not that of mutualism. Rather, it was that of a radical ideological drive that uses the military power to impose what it wants. The security forces formed the third leg of the new order, and together they constructed a system of oppression. One would safely say that the operational logic of the new order was “undoing.” To undo the bourgeoisie economic order, its parliamentary politics, along with what culturally goes with them – all was done in a manner that could be adequately described as systematic corruption and “uncreative destruction.” The ideological factions within the party soon surfaced, and the internal fights among the red comrades were settled brutally. As for the Ba’ath Party intellectuals, they had to flee Syria for their safety.

Dictatorship without Ideology

The ascendance of the Ba’ath was not simply that of an ideological group that took the country by surprise. Rather, there was social basis for such change of course. The upward mobility after independence was mainly a big city phenomenon that effected Damascus and Aleppo in addition to Homs. Political leadership came from those cities, while towns and the countryside continued their marginality. The socialist mantra partially appealed to segments of the population that did not have much stake in the post-independence development, which went along the modernization thesis. Those who were attracted to socialist ideas did so not as a crystallized ideology but more out of dissatisfaction with current life chances. But one should not exaggerate this economic class dimension, since Syria then did experience a sharp feudal system despite the existence of few landowning families. Syria, to a large extent, was a middle-class country and continued to be as such, to some extent.

There was a segment of population that experienced double-marginality, social and economic. Such a segment was not the non-Muslim minorities, since Christians were in a favorable position. Instead, it was specifically the Alawite and the Druze minorities. Those offshoot Muslim groups formed 16 percent of the population; the Alawite represented the largest (10 to 12 percent) of the Syrian population, while the Druze were around 3 percent.⁸ Both are syncretic sects that formed in the second century AH, and espoused an esoteric approach to Islam. As they do not share with mainstream Islam what is referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam or the Six Pillars of Faith, the Sunni and the Shī‘ah literature did not consider them Muslims. Consequently, they did not benefit from the Ottoman Millet system. Nevertheless, the first Syrian constitutions did explicitly note that Alawites are Muslims, and late President Assad obtained from the late Lebanese Imam Mosa al-Sadr a *fatwā* that considers Alawites as Muslims. However, it is not the confessional sectarian basis that formed the political system of Syria, not to be confused with that of Lebanon; rather the social reality of such sects was a significant factor in the future development of Syria.

Many of the men enlisted in the army are from these two minorities, along with the Ismā‘īli. This started before the independence of Syria, since France formed the Army of the Levant and actively recruited from those minorities. The trend continued after independence as such a job is a good opportunity for people whose areas were neglected and not developed.

Seven years after the Ba’ath Party assumed power, a new revelation became apparent. While the Ba’ath Party spoke in the name of the proletariats and many of its leaders came from neglected villages and towns, there was a more cohesive core within that party covertly orchestrating the scene. This core was known as the “military committee” and consisted of five people: Hafez Assad, Muhammad Omran, Salah Jadid, Salim Hatoom, and Abdul Karim Jundi, and – the first three were Alawite, the fourth was a Druze, and the fifth was an Ismā‘īli. This secretive committee was formed in 1960 at a period of political merger or unity between Egypt and Syria. Hatoom, who was the leader of a formidable special force (formed mainly from Kurds) and who recklessly defended the goals of the committee, was later killed because he disagreed with one of the committees’ decisions; Jundi committed suicide; the leftist idealistic Omran, who once led a force to rescue the Palestinians in Jordan, was expelled to Lebanon and assassinated there; and when Hafez Assad assumed power in his 1970 coup, he sent Jadid to prison to die there. Soon Assad appointed his brother, who was the commander of the special force, the Saraya al-Difaa, to be the second man in the country watching for the regime.⁹

The aforementioned details show the pattern of the struggle for power in Syria. There was first a sudden shift in power holders from social elites to those on the marginal of the society. Later on, the sectarian element was utilized to consolidate power; specifically, the largest non-Sunni sect, the Alawite, became very powerful. Mobilized by a sense of antagonism, they took advantage of their large numbers in the military to monopolize power positions, politically and otherwise. Later on, Hafiz Assad wrest control from the rest of his Alawite comrades and established a more complex basis for political power.

Since Assad was minister of defense, he worked on establishing a political order that was three-pronged. First, Assad reversed the course of the previous left-leaning administration under the Ba'ath, and loosened governmental restrictions over free trade. Second, conscious of the American penetration into the Middle East and North Africa in the 1967 war with Israel, Assad handed over the well-fortified strategic Syrian Golan Heights without a fight. Later in 1976, he responded to the American-European plan and entered Lebanon on their behalf to neutralize the rising Palestinian power there, and the Syrian Army participated in the Tal al-Zaatar Massacre against the Palestinians. Syrian forces also participated in the Desert Storm operation in Iraq in 1991. Third, Assad diversified his base of support, co-opting political aspirants, and creating a shadow political opposition from the remnants of Nassirists, communists, and Arab nationalists. He also co-opted a few religious figures. However, in each of these three dimensions, the Assad regime manipulated two opposing poles. On the economic front, the modest opening was coupled with an empowering of a few Alawites, who previously had no experience in that sector along with other Christian, Shi'ah, and Sunni businessmen. Responding to the American mandate in the area was balanced by supporting anti-American forces: Hamas in the Gaza strip and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Furthermore, Assad kept decent connections with the Russians, and modernized some army units. Assad's newly enhanced regional position allowed him to make connections with opposing powers – Turkey and some Arabian Gulf states on one hand and Iran on the other. On the internal front, the diversification of the political base was coupled with the redistributing of power positions in state institutions, putting in charge confidants, invariably Alawite, along other personal loyalists. And while the pre-Assad Ba'ath period was dominated by the influence of the party and the military, the Assad phase became dominated by security forces loyal to him, including the military itself becoming completely controlled by a special security apparatus connected to the president.

Therefore, Assad built a regime of power by the masterful manipulation of contradictions. The system is not Alawite for it rests on a wider co-opted base. However, the Alawites in the system form a dependable solid base that had no choice but to support the Assad regime. As mentioned above, Assad did not hesitate to eliminate rivals from his own sect and from the small circle that brought him to power. Later, he got rid of his brother when his brother aspired to the top position in the country. That occurred after his brother Rifat who is now in Paris, exploited the illness of Hafiz and mobilized the special forces under his command, the forces that were in charge of defending the regime. The showdown between the two brothers threatened to tear down Damascus, the capital, but Hafez Assad prevailed as he had a larger span of control than his brother. However, Hafez kept the balance within the ruling family and negotiated the exile of Rifat with a big sum from the treasury.

Neoliberal Family Dictatorship

The system that Bashar Assad, the current Syrian president, inherited was a family system of power, supported vertically by sectarian loyalties and horizontally by big financial interests. The vertical component, the common Alawite, knew that they could not get a better deal under any other regime. People in the horizontal component knew that their advantage is contingent and that they will be eliminated if they blink – and some of them were eliminated because of an unwanted blink.

Several challenging factors entered the scene at the era of Assad the son who came to power in year 2000. Apart from his initial inexperience in politics, changes at the international front seemed to have overwhelmed the system that the father built. Some of these changes were geopolitically in nature, other were economic.

On the international scene, the Syrian regime continued what it has perfected for years, betting on multiple horses. In the 2003 Iraq war and occupation, the Syrian regime played the double role of cooperating with the Americans and supporting the insurgent against them. Syria was forced to withdraw from Lebanon after the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005, giving Hezbollah in Lebanon an unexpected boost and pushed Syria to a more dependant relationship with Iran. The major improvement of relationship with Turkey was historic, solidifying the position of the regime. Such developments seemed to have been loaded with latent contradictions. Although one might conclude that the Syrian regime maintained its regional position, or even fortified it, it seems that the surrounding environment faced the regime with contradictory forces that cannot be reconciled.

On one hand, a set of forces was pushing the country toward an Egyptian-Mubarak model, and another set was intensifying its isolation by staying very close to Iran.

On the economic front, the forces of globalism that the Assad the father was trying to deflect grew larger at the time of the son. Those in the power position, including top military generals, were very interested in riding the capitalist wave. Assad Jr. introduced some measures that liberalized the economy, even if the lion shares went first to the ruling family and its confidants. However, the dynamics of capital can disturb the non-market basis of power. The careful and modest openings of the economy – basic as they were, such as allowing Internet service to operate in Syria – boosted the popularity of the young president, gave new hopes, and created new beneficiaries. Those measures that introduced a sense of normality in the life of Syrians, are the same measures that made the logic of revolution more palatable – why should one settle with the crumbs that the still oppressive regime is sprinkling? The modest living improvements for some segments increasingly seemed like a moving target, and they can be contrasted to a new class of financial tycoons. The impetus for a revolution was present; indeed, Islamically spirited public protest erupted several times in the ear of dictatorship, and in each time, it was brutally suppressed, accompanied by the desecration of Islamic symbols, and followed with systematic revenge, all of which added to the accumulated grievances deep in the collective memories of the majority.

In sum, there are Syria-specific conditions that distinguish the circumstances of its revolution from the rest of the Arab countries. First, the vibrancy of the people was matched with agitated diversity and fissures in the collective identities of the different populations constituting the society. Second, the developmental projects after independence and the rural-urban disparity functioned as fault lines underneath the very foundation of the society. Third, the colonial design facilitated an abnormal rise of minority sects, which let them play a decisive role in politics using coercive power. Fourth, corruption was institutionalized with a revolutionary zeal under the banner of creating a society that is secular, socialist, and anti-imperialism. Fifth, the geopolitical position of Syria put it under regional pressures from the time of its formation, which resulted in regional alliances that if helped the party in power they hurt the lives of ordinary people. All of these factors simultaneously justify rebellion and makes it hard to materialize. But before turning to the revolution of the new millennia, the realm of Islamic activism should be described, since it is the realm where most of the revolutionary potential dwells.

Islamic Activism

Although that mainstream Muslims constitute only 75 percent of the Syrian population, the Islamic motif pervades the national culture. The Syrian culture dearly holds on conservative values that have religious expressions, be it among Muslims, Christians, Druze, etc. Discussing Islamic movements should be put in such a context since the Syrian society was always at the heart of the Muslim civilization. Islamic movements are organically connected to the society, and do not merely constitute a political phenomenon or a social fad.

We can recognize five streams of Islamic movements that are mainstays in Syria (as in other Arab countries). There are the Sufi movements, which generally shun politics. There are the ulama who focus on scriptural interpretations and the like, and thus, are apolitical. However, when there is a threat of foreign intervention these two groups might become political. Third, there are activist ulama and sheikhs who lead what is referred to as “mosque movements.” Despite the political quietism of this type of Islamic activism, preaching on social issues has at times political implications, which take a central role at the time of social strife. Fourth, there are full Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in which social change, including politics, is a staple in their discourse. Lastly, there are the independents who also seek social change but without belonging to an organizational structure; they also tend to form the intellectual base of the general Islamic current. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been inspired by that of the one in Egypt. After his return from Al-Azhar University, Mustafa al-Siba‘a formed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood out of a coalition of several Islamic organizations. This type of loose formation stamped the nature of the movement and its internal dynamics, leading to a major split in the early 1970s.

All streams of Islamic activism faced the curtailment of their activities. General freedom, and the freedom of religious activism in particular, was first pressured after the unification with Egypt. The regime’s enmity toward the Muslim Brotherhood spilled from Egypt to Syria because of their sharing the same ideological orientation and the same ultimate goal. When the unification was dissolved and political life was revived, the Muslim Brotherhood nominated senior members to serve in the parliament. It should be noted that such participation did not go well with many ulama, as it was perceived as an encroachment over their legitimacy.

When the Ba’ath Socialist Party captured power in 1963, politics became the exclusive domain of the laborers and peasants, as the party’s slogans and ideology clarified. The Ba’ath party is the only governing party,

and its members were handed not only political and administrative positions, but also positions deemed influential, such as a school principal.

There were always heated confrontations in the university between the Islamically-minded on one hand, and the Ba'athists, Nasserites, and other nationalists of secular persuasions on the other hand. But after the advent of the Ba'ath, the Muslim Brotherhood was considered an illegal organization, a front of the West, and an enemy of the regime; consequently, the movement went underground. Repression against political adversaries, and Islamic activism in particular, progressively increased reaching its zenith in the Marxist phase of the Ba'ath party in the late 1960s. When Hafiz al-Asad assumed power in 1970, control over religious activities was loosened. Mosque movements mushroomed and became neighborhood magnets attracting large numbers of young people. This development corresponded with a populous shift in Arab-Muslim consciousness. The post-1967 national mood after the Arab defeat with Israel delegitimized nationalist Arabist claims. The turn toward religion was not simply a young people phenomenon, but a common one. Muslim activists remained very cautious and completely aware of the red lines that they cannot cross – just working within the acceptable parameters of teaching the Qūran, *Sirah*, or *fiqh*. Indeed, the new Assad regime soon went into a systematic effort of cleansing the national curriculum of unwanted Islamic ideas, and several backward Muslim teachers were laid-off. Occasional imprisonment also took place.

Since the Ba'ath came into power, there was a campaign to instill in the nation a secular-socialist and anti-Islamic programs both at the cultural and institutional levels. However, in the 1970s, this effort took a sectarian meaning. The Alawites became very entrenched in the government and used their political positions for extortion. The humiliation of citizens pervaded everyday life: at the bread line, while driving and having to yield to the rushing fancy cars of the sons of officials, or at the windows of governmental offices while doing one of the many frustrating bureaucratic transactions. Symbolic violence that insults ordinary Muslims flared every once in a while, such as a sacrilegious drawing in a regime-sponsored magazine, or the militia of the President's brother going into the streets of Damascus forcibly taking-off the head covers of women. Another set of examples of blatantly offending Islamic sensibilities occurred during the mandatory military service that young people have to go through. The low-ranking uneducated officer would order university graduate trainees to bring their bed sheets and wrap themselves with them like they were in the hajj. Then, he orders them to go around the cabin and say, "*Labayk* oh officer, *labayk*"

(Here I am, oh officer, Here I am). One cannot exaggerate the discontent that the majority mainstream Muslims felt. As a stark example, the greeting with “*Assalam Alaikum*” in a formal setting became a taboo. Furthermore, being a minority, save for the Kurds, was advantageous. Those perks include being trusted in occupying key positions. The minorities other than the Kurds had special protections; a minority individual is generally not suspected, less likely to be imprisoned – and if imprisoned, less likely to be tortured. Conversely, the more Islamically oriented the person is, the harsher the curtailment and revenge was.

As the day-to-day life became more suffocating, by the late 1970s, the militant discourse of a free-spirited Islamic personality, based in the city of Hamah, became more convincing. The Fighting Front (al-Taliaa al-Muqatila) was formed with a program to end the regime through violence, including the assassination of key officials, Alawites as well as Ba’athists. President Hafiz al-Asad himself was subject to a mysterious assassination attempt. This militant movement was successful in enlisting some members of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as members from the mosque movements. A wide campaign to arrest Islamic activists was carried with vengeance, directed principally to the Muslim Brotherhood but reached many other young Muslim activists. The Muslim Brotherhood leadership, lacking coherence in decision making, issued statements in support of the actions against the regime. After a puzzling event, in which a few dozen Alawite recruits were shot dead in a military school, the Presidential Decree Number 49 was issued, prescribing the death penalty to the members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Many were jailed and tortured just for being considered “Islamists”; others were hung. The city of Hamah was bombed and brutally suppressed. Many Muslim activists fled the country. Islamic activism was crushed. The regime paraded its triumphant success over traitors who conspired against the nation. Later on, fully confident of itself, the regime sponsored mosque courses for Qurān memorization. Also, it allowed for one friendly mosque movement and one Sufi-like women’s Islamic movement to operate under watchful eyes, only to be curtailed again in the last few years. Ironically, the dismantling of Islamic movements allowed Muslim activists to broaden their views and become more in touch with the world; they are an integral part of the revolutionary momentum today.

Realities on the Ground

Those who were betting the no revolution would erupt in Syria were not cognizant of the extent of the grievances of the majority of the population.

On the surface, people were content and trying to make the best of what was available. However, there were scars deep in the hearts and minds of the majority, scars that related to their dignity and collective identity. The current revolution is a popular communal one, of which no party or ideological group can claim ownership. Yes, it was preceded with activities by human rights activists who were calling for reform – and in year 2000, they issued what is known as the “Damascus Declaration,” a statement of unity by opposition leaders at the moment of the new young President assuming power. The promised reforms did not materialize; worse, those who signed the declaration, in addition to other prominent intellectuals, were jailed for a long time. Such modest activities provided a contemporary and democratic framework for the revolution. From day one, the revolution adopted a mature vision of a modern and just sociopolitical order. The Syrian American Council press release on April 19, 2011 summarized the demands of the protests:

We stand in support of the legitimate demands of the Syrian people and call on President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian government to begin immediate implementation of the desired reforms, which include:

- apply immediately and completely the decision to revoke emergency law in all its forms
- release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience
- introduce clear measures to fight corruption
- recognize political parties and the freedom of expression
- advance social justice and the pursuit of economic prosperity and social advancement, and improve public service
- restructure the security agencies to protect constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens
- amend the constitution to limit the presidential term of office
- hold accountable the perpetrators of the killing of peaceful demonstrators and bring them to justice

We ask God to save our people and preserve their unity and inspire the president to speed up the implementation of the promises and defend dignity and freedom.¹⁰

Numerous similar public releases echoed the points above. Subsequent public statements included specific demands – such as lifting the state of emergency, which was in place since the Ba’ath took power in 1963, and dropping Article 8 from the constitution, which states that the Ba’ath Party is the leader of the state and the society.

The above characterization of the revolution is too abstract. Providing a brief description of the development on the ground is necessary to

appreciate the momentum of the revolutionary. Early in 2011, there were marginal protest activities, such as a small gathering of less than one hundred people near the Libyan embassy in support of its revolution, and another one near the office of the ministry of the interior, each of which was responded to by security forces. But on March 15, 2011, the official day of the start of the revolution, a small demonstration was organized near the entrance of the Umayyad Mosque, which carried a symbolic meaning that could not be missed, and some of participants were arrested. Three days later, Facebook posts called for a Friday of Dignity, and larger demonstrations appeared in several cities. But the revolution went full blown that day as the consequence of the revelation of the fate of children in the southern town of Daraa. Those children had written on street walls slogans echoing the Egyptian Tahrir Square chants: "People want to bring down the regime." Hell erupted that day as the negotiation of the town elders with government officials failed to secure the release of the children who have been imprisoned for a week. Instead, people of this city, and in all Syria, were shocked to know that children, none over fifteen years old, were tortured. This city became "the cradle of the revolution," and sustained protest ensued. The response of the security forces was wide arrest and shooting with life ammunition, in addition the destruction of property, tanks shelling the Omar historic mosque, and security forces desecrating the copies of the Qurān inside it.

The mention of the synopsis above is important for three reasons: first, it asserts the relative spontaneous nature of the revolution and its sudden eruption, which went early on beyond what anyone envisioned; second, it reminds us that the revolution that is totally peaceful in nature was met from day one with extreme violence; and third, it highlights the intentional insult of the religious sentiments of the public perpetuated by the security forces. These three dimensions still form the contours of the revolution, despite new developments, and largely affect how the revolution sees itself.

Within the two weeks after the starting point of the revolution, protest demonstrations spread to many Syrian cities where bare chests were facing life bullets, and death was accepted for the price of crying with what became the standard motto: "Allah, Syria, Freedom, and nothing else" (it rhymes in Arabic). All such incidents were happening with no governmental office response, as if nothing was happening in the country. Worse, at the end of March 2011, President Bashar addressed the nation; in the place of expected reconciliatory gestures, his empty speech and his short involuntary laughter further offended the nation. Every revolution has a point of no return, and this early date was the first one. But a more solid point

of no return occurred in the fourth month of the revolution after Homs became “The Capitol of the Revolution.” The month of Ramadan, the fifth month of the revolution cemented the revolution and permanently stamped its character. The regime violated the sanctity of the month and carried out unspeakable acts of violence.

The consciousness of the revolution went into three phases. The first phase was that of an innocent belief in civil action. Inspired, or more accurately duped, by the theatrical Tahrir Square view, the young people on the ground were bent to prove their yearning to freedom and that they were willing to pay whatever price it required. Such consciousness was captured by three YouTube segments in the early days of the revolution: a man in the city of Daraa facing a line of soldiers and shouting: “Kill me, kill me. . .” while his friend was taping the event. The second one was of a young man in the suburb of Damascus, probably under twenty, running in the middle of the street with a bare chest and shouting “*Allah Akbar*,” while security forces were shooting to disperse the crowd; he fell dead. The third was of teenagers in the coastal city Baniyas, lying on the ground in front of tanks. This phase lasted around five months – demonstrating that a solid will for freedom was thought to awaken the democratic sensibilities of the world and that the revolution would, somehow, win. This phase insisted on three no’s: no violence; no sectarianism, and no external military intervention.

After Ramadan and the continuous use of extreme violence, the consciousness of the revolution shifted to call for outside help. This phase was not only marked by a violent crackdown of protest in the streets, but also by unspeakable acts of torturing of those who were rounded up and imprisoned. The title of a Human Rights Watch report depicts the situation “We’ve Never Seen Such Horror,”¹¹ and other reports confirmed the ugly picture of systematic violence.¹² After the fall of the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in October 2011, people reasoned that the Libyan scenario was not bad after all; the people accepted enduring such pain for a clear-cut outcome. The demonstrations in this period started to carry signs asking for international intervention.

The third phase in the revolutionary consciousness was that of deep and painful realization. People became convinced that no international power was interested in helping the poor Syrian people. Turkish flags were once hung in some cities after supporting statements from Prime Minister Erdoğan of Turkey, but a puzzled disappointment replaced the hope in help from the strong Muslim neighbor. The reserved and wavering statements of the leaders of Western powers were further disappointments. The revolutionary consciousness then validated its original doubts that it is not

in the interest of any country, either Arab or non-Arab, to seek political change in Syria. This state of consciousness was reflected in the songs that demonstrators sang mocking international powers and in the often repeated chant: “We have nobody [on our side] but You Oh Allah.”

This last phase coincided with a serious new development – the rise of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Defection from the army occurred spontaneously. Homs, the central city, became the hub of protest activities. Huge demonstrations and revolutionary celebrations continually took place in its main square. The wit and creativity of the protest went beyond what the regime could tolerate. The army was sent there to suppress the city. But a neighboring town, Rastan, had large numbers of servicemen in the army. How can you shoot your own people on behalf of a regime that you loath? More than that, in the last decade, Homs witnessed the increase of the Alawite who came and lived on the outskirts of the city. Recruits from those neighborhoods were organized by the regime to suppress revolutionary activities. As elsewhere in the country, those civilian thug formations perpetuated unspeakable atrocities. Not only did they break into homes, damaged what is inside and stole valuable items, they also used rape as an ultimate humiliating tool. Those groups were also responsible for the massacres – the slaughters and the burned families and children – that surfaced in the last month. The civilian thug rings that the regime organized serve two purposes: they intimidated and inflicted considerable damage; they also incited sectarian feelings because probably half of their members were Alawites, while the other half were released criminals and street hooligans. Thus, the mandate the FSA adopted for itself was a defensive posture to “protect civilians.” The number of the FSA members increased significantly in the last month, but FSA units still functioned largely independent, despite regular communication with its leader, a general who now resides in Turkey. What is important to mention is that the FSA is poorly equipped and depends on what it can capture or buy of weapons and ammunition – no evidence yet that there is a regular outside supply.¹³

The situation on the ground can be summarized as the following. The regime engaged in extreme violence in most cities and surrounding towns and villages. In this way, the regime had struck its own social base, and it did that in the early days of the revolution and continued until today. Countering this reckless suppression, the regime put its security weight in northern city, Aleppo, the financial center, and in Damascus, the capitol, to suppress the least of protest activities. But the rural areas around Aleppo are up in arms. The suburbs of Damascus never seized to be active from day one of the revolution; fifteen kilometers far from the Presidential palace, tens of thousands demonstrate, and they do that after being repeatedly

suppressed with brutality. Inside the city of Damascus, there is a continuous creative civil protest tactics: handing the independence flag on bridges (which is different from the current flag), changing the names of the street with the names of martyrs, and coloring with red the water in the fountains of public squares. Such activities are specifically inspired by a Gandhi-like sheikh who has followers in Damascus and by some other civic informal organization.

The above description is meant to make emphasize that widespread of the revolutionary activity, the collapse of the regime legitimacy, and its inability to control except by extreme violence that breeds more resistance. The logic of the regime is to raise the cost of resistance to an unbearable level. The logic of the resistance is that of atrocities and humiliation that no dignified human being would accept; and a huge price has already been paid, scaling back would mean allowing the regime to increase the scope of its revenge.

The political struggle on the ground juxtaposes the struggle for the reconciliation of collective identities in Syria. Identity tensions are naturally stronger among minorities, and I am speaking here of collective identities, not personal ones – identities in the sociohistorical sense of imagined communities. It is imperative not to forget that the Alawite are engulfed with this challenge even more than Sunnis. The difference is that for identity recovery for the Sunnis is clear, precisely because they always formed the overwhelming majority, and more importantly because their meta-culture had formed the content of the civilization of the area. Identity reconstruction for the Alawite is associated with uncertainties.

All collective identities pass a stage of tension at historical junctures. The collective identity of the Alawite is facing these days acute tension. The memories of past grievances do not form enough basis for new beginnings, and not healthy starting points. And regardless of whether the grievances of Alawite were exaggerated or not, their political rise did not resolve their marginality. It is true that, unlike the past, there are now successful individuals among the Alawite – those did work hard and deserve to be proud of their achievements. However, this is not the story of the average Alawite, and the Alawite-controlled regime did not really serve its people. The middle-class Alawite were favored for positions in the bureaucracy; some of them grew with such experiences, while others stayed within the confines of being lucky for receiving an entitlement. The largest segment of the poor villagers and the low-level recruits in the army and the security forces were actually harmed by the rise of the Alawite political elite. Neither were they steered to develop marketable skills nor were they put in an environment that fosters becoming cultured.

In such a configuration of an ethnic group, what are the options for a renewed collective identity? As expected, the financial elite merged into the global thievery class, while the cultural elite found their nirvana in secular ideas, whether leftist or liberal. Such a substitute of identity of the first group and a ventilation of identity of the second do not create a “real” identity for the group as a totality. The collective identity then becomes prone to degenerate to mere sticking together. Unfortunately, the glue for sticking together in this case was provided by an illegitimate political body that operates on a slash-and-burn formula. In this way, the Alawite who least benefited from the sectarian order were led to engage in unspeakable acts of violence; even some middle-class members participated in the orgy of violence, turning hospitals and clinics into places for sadistic acts. Unfortunately, this is not an unknown phenomenon in the history of the human race. And this is not meant to assign them or absolve them from guilt, since some members from the non-Alawite groups carried their share of supporting the regime. But those non-Alawite groups will be remembered as such – as latent support precisely because their personal positions on which they acted, not because of belonging to a segment of the population that was mobilized to serve the dreams of dictators, rather they were mainly driven by utilitarian motives. Silent Christians might be remembered as selfish, and silent Sunnis as timid, but Alawite members cannot be remembered as such even if they were just silent or fence sitters.

Again, for the Sunni, the challenge is a matter of recovery, of bringing alive an imagined community that, nevertheless, existed empirically and stamped the character of a civilization. The Alawite do not have such a luxury. The available options for the Alawite, it seems, is one of three. First, they can work on building an identity around the religious ideas of their past; such a trend exists among some Alawite in Turkey but is a rarity among Syrians. The second is to opt out from a religious identity altogether; this seems to be the desired choice, and consumerism of the contemporary world certainly pushes in that direction. The third choice is to draw on Shi’ism; the religious establishment in Iran had been a proposition in their minds for a long time.

The situation has reached the point of a dangerous stalemate. The regime is still cohesive at top, and as Theda Skocpol theorized, “all regimes unravel from above.”¹⁴ Not only the regime does not show cracks at the top, its cohesiveness extends downwards through the Alawite who are solidly with it. Also, the regime depends mainly on the Fourth Battalion, which is well-trained, equipped, and staffed overwhelmingly with loyal Alawites. It should be noted, however, that not all Alawites benefited from the regime;

their villages are still the poorest. But the sect cannot imagine an order in which they lose their relative advantage – and they are also afraid of revenge. The Christian community, along with Sunni big financial interests, is largely on the side of the regime. But the regime is also exhausted. The latest International Crisis Group report summarizes the situation in Syria: “The regime cannot truly ‘win’; what it might do is endure. . . . Slowly but surely, its military capacity is eroding, a result of a trickling stream of defections, declining recruitment and plummeting morale. The economy is devastated and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In particular, the agricultural sector has been disrupted by conflict, fuel shortages and the disappearance of state services.”¹⁵

Geopolitics and Pathways

The Tunisian revolution was one of a peripheral country that enjoys a high level of literacy and endowed with a mature Islamic movement led by the wisdom of the popular leader, Ghanoushi. The Egyptian revolution came in installments and is still unfolding. The country has significant number of civil society institutions and the existence of the weighty Muslim Brother movement. Whatever one would speak of the erratic politics of this movement, it nevertheless has the potential for mass mobilization. The Libyan revolution toppled a system of an eccentric form of dictatorship that had a weak institutional basis. All of those revolutions occurred in countries in which there is a reasonably homogeneous population; the tribal affiliation in Libya, often overemphasized in analysis, operated mainly on the social level, while in the Yemeni case both the regime and the opposition had tribal affiliations that somewhat evenly distributed political power. None of these conditions are present in the Syrian case. In comparison to other Arab revolutions, the Syrian one is much more complex, and since its outcome will have a regional impact the obstacles multiply.

As it became clear, the situation in Syria is that of stalemate, neither side can achieve its desired decisive outcome. The Syrian opposition is now begging for help. The strongest encouragement so far came from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The support of the United States and Europe is wavering and stopped at the level of economic measures. On the other hand Russia and China has been using their veto power against a Security Council strong resolution against Syria. The double vetoes are coming as a relief to NATO countries that are not in a position to do anything serious regarding Syria. As for the United States, one analyst described its position in the following: “through masterful inaction we’ll get the exact same result we would have through

some kind of intervention. ”¹⁶ One might say that the international community is interested in curbing the power or getting rid of a rouge regime, but is neither willing to pay the price for achieving that nor is ready to bear its consequences.

The Syrian revolution is a geopolitical earthquake on a fault-line at which the north-south alliance (Turkey through Saudi) intersects with an east-west alliance (Iran-Iraq-Lebanon). Observers agree that geopolitical factors are playing a decisive role in the case of Syria. If the current regime of Syria collapses, there will be an instantaneous change in the political alignments in Lebanon; Hezbollah which is supported by Iran will be the looser, while the Christian, the Sunni and other groups would recover their place. Jordan would likely to begin switching to constitutional monarchy; as one observer put it, it is hard to guess what Jordan would look like the next day after the change of the Syrian regime.¹⁷ This means that the waves of the Arab Spring would have reached the borders of the Arabian Peninsula. In Iraq, the northwest Sunni region would start to recover its lost position. It is also likely that the Iranian opposition would be reawakened, though it is now in disarray. It should be mentioned that Hamas had to leave its offices in Damascus, lest be accused of siding with a regime that is trying to eradicate an Islamically spirited social movement. Again, no country in the historic Bilad al-Sham can shield itself from the effects of the Syrian uprising.

All the above might be dwarfed by the Turkish dilemma. Turkey stands to be the top beneficiary from a change in Syria, contrasted to an equal loss to Iran. Turkey has excess potential ready to flow into Syria and to cross to the rest of the MENA countries. Despite the deep and hurtful feelings because of the Turkish abandonment of the Syrian revolution, no country has more credentials in Syria than Turkey. But Turkey’s stance in Syria is polarized between lovers and loathers. While the seventy percent Arab Sunni of the population see the Turkish model as their very own, the ten percent Kurds are Turkey’s political enemies and the rest twenty percent resent Turkey on religio-cultural grounds. But anyway, most of the revolutionary weight comes from the seventy percent Arab Sunni segment. Among the political opposition, the small segments of the left and of the Arab nationalists who are not siding with the regime are also allergic to Turkey’s influence.

Turkey has similar population grouping to that of Syria: around 20 percent Kurds and around, 10 percent Alawite. Although the Alawite of Turkey are different from those of Syria, they are not hiding their support to the Assad regime.¹⁸ The Kurdish issue is overwhelming for Turkey, as

their grievances are institutionally elaborated and their political power is mobilized. If Turkey helps in changing the regime in Syria, a vacuum of power will most likely occur, at least for a short period, and Kurds would not waste time and exploit it to come closer to their dream of establishing an independent Kurdistan. The Syrian regime already empowered the Kurdish radical Kurdistan Workers Party and using their forces to suppress rebellion in the northeast of Syria.

Turkey's new principle of "zero problem neighborhood" is a laudable principle that rightly rejects the Hobbesian view of international relations. However, as any principle it has own limitations; it could not be maintained or defended if we adopt a system view of geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, Turkey would be happy to undercut Russian and Iranian dominance, but Turkey is energy deprived country and used to import three quarters of its energy needs from exactly those two countries. Moreover, an intervention in Syria would very likely trigger revenge from Iran; and radical Iran can call for future martyrs in order to extend its political cause, while rational Turkish politics rest on vote swing moods. Furthermore, Israel that is fearful from Iran and jealous from Turkey might find that its own interest lies in facilitating the clash between those two regional powers.

Turkey recognizes that a direct interference in Syria is not less than stepping into a quagmire. That is why it would not interfere without a larger coalition of international powers, and most importantly the United States. Currently Turkey is overly cautious, sealing its borders from even letting non-lethal help reach Syria, let alone military one. But the big question is whether Turkey can stay isolated from extended turbulence in Syria.

Iran – and by extension, the Hezbollah – had the choice of a long and thorny road of supporting the oppressed mustad'afin of Syria or to succumb to the ruthlessness of expediency. Ironically, despite that the former option entails delicate engagement, it would have been closer to achieve the dream of a Persian empire imbued by Shi'ism. But it seems that religious sectarianism blinded the shroud policy making of Iran; Iran put all its weight behind the Syrian regime only to lose all of its credentials, not only in Syria but in Arab countries in general. Politicking took a sharper form when Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, proclaimed to a large audience that what they see on TV and on YouTube of destruction in the city of Homs is a "fabrication." Only few months ago, Nasrallah's pictures were hanging in many Syrian places, and the party of southern Lebanon lost a historic opportunity to normalize its existence in Lebanon and in the Arab region and to prove through action that the party is not an Iranian front.

It seems that international analysts are reaching their conclusions late, underestimating the deep-seated dynamics of the Syrian revolution. If no extensive help reaches the Syrian opposition, most likely the situation becomes worse and more unstable, not that the revolution get extinguished. In that case foreign fighters, now slim in numbers,¹⁹ would likely to pour into Syria, destabilizing western Iraq and Jordan.²⁰ If such forces weaken the Syrian regime grip on the northeast as it concentrates on more important cities, this would trigger Kurdish dynamics across the region including Turkey. Proxy groups fighting in Syria on behalf of regional powers, not civil war, is also one possible scenario. Not only Turkey loses an opportunity in failing to support change in Syria, but also realpolitik would hurt its own international stature, and Iran would become emboldened to bully Turkey and chip way from its standing.

Conclusion

Syria today is reconciling the Levant's contradictions of the twentieth century. Regardless of the outcome, the revolution in Syria has already attained goals that were thought before impossible to reach. The Syrian people rediscovered their collective identity as a colorful social order which is at once Muslim, Arab, and accommodative of non-Muslims, non-Arabs, and Muslim offshoot groups. The revolution opened the eyes to national challenges that the people are eager to address and not to brush aside. The revolution had unleashed powers that no one expected to become mobilized. The revolution built bridges between rural and urban Syria in a manner unmanageable before. The revolution also strengthened social class connections. The revolution recovered a suppressed Muslim cultural milieu, of which its absence made people live alien in their own country. The revolution made nationalists, liberalists, leftists, and Islamists sit together and form the Syrian National Council, the main body of political opposition. The revolution constructed a national vision of what the future State of Syria should look like. And finally, the revolution connected the Syrian people more tightly with the other peoples of the Spring that blossomed among Arabs. Whether such achievements become institutionalized in a new political order is still uncertain.

Notes

1. James L. Gelvin. *The Modern Middle East: A History* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 82.
3. *Ibid.*, 97–98.

4. According to Pew Global Survey, the percentage on all non-Muslims in Egypt is only five. This is a touchy issue as in the past Copts were not happy with the once accepted population percent of thirteen.
5. Taking the Syrian and Lebanese population together, we find the following in today's numbers: Christians, 1,560,000; Lebanese Christians, 1,560,000; and Syrian Christians, 2,200,000 = 3,760,000. Thus, the percentage of Christians in Syria is approximately 14 percent of the total population of Syria. Sources sight a lower share of the Alawite around the time of independence, due to an undercount or due to increase fertility after the independence.
6. Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989).
7. Bashir Abdeen, *The Military and Politics in Syria, 1918–2000*. (Dar al-Jabya, 2000).
8. See CIA World Factbook, Syria, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook.
9. Abdeen, *The Military and Politics in Syria*.
10. Syrian American Council, www.sacouncil.com.
11. "We've Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces," *Human Rights Watch*, June 2011, www.hrw.org/reports/2011/06/01/we-ve-never-seen-such-horror-0.
12. "The Long Reach of the Mukhabarat: Violence and Harassment against Syrian Abroad and their Relatives Back Home," Amnesty International, Oct 2011; "I Wanted to Die: Syrian Torture Survivors Speak Out," Amnesty International, 2012, www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/i-wanted-to-die-syria-s-torture-survivors-speak-out.
13. "Syrian Armed Opposition," Middle East Security Report, Feb 2012, www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-armed-opposition.
14. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
15. Syria's Phase of Radicalisation," International Crisis Group, April 10, 2012, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/b033-syrias-phase-of-radicalisation.aspx.
16. "Iran and Syria: A Tale of Two Crises," Brookings Institute, Saban Center, February, 2, 2012, www.brookings.edu/events/2012/0202_iran_syria.aspx.
17. See *Jordan's Reluctance To Confront Syria*. Stratfor, Apr 13, 2012.
18. "The Syrian Nightmare." Zaman Online Magazine, Apr 10, 2012. www.todayszaman.com/columnist-277034-the-syrian-nightmare.html.

19. "Syrian Armed Opposition."
20. See "The Long Insurgency in Syria." Stratfor Global Intelligence, April 3, 2012, www.stratfor.com/sample/geopolitical-diary/long-insurgency-syria.