

THE LONG AND BLOODY SPRING:  
THE UNIQUENESS OF THE  
SYRIAN UPRISING

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
with a Major in Political Science  
May 2014

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my two grandfathers, Bouchaib Ouardi and Mohamed Aboudia Ibn Taher.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To my mother and father: thank you for instilling in me the values of hard work, excellence, and integrity. Without your valuable support and encouragement, none of my educational achievements would have been possible. Words alone cannot describe my love and admiration for you.

To my wife: I will forever be indebted to your love and unconditional support. Thank you for all the sacrifices and for standing by my side.

To my two children: you are my everyday motivation. May this work be a reflection of the role model I am striving to be.

To Dr. Edward Mihalkanin: you have truly been a great mentor and a valuable resource throughout the semesters I spent in the M.A. program. It is an honor to have you as a chair of my thesis committee. My sincere gratitude for everything you have taught me inside and outside the classroom.

To Dr. Kenneth Grasso: I will forever remember the first course I took with you. It will always be a source of inspiration in my future teaching career. Thank you for serving in my thesis committee and for all the help and support.

To Dr. Hassan Tajalli: I will forever be grateful for the support and feedback you have provided. Thank you.

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## **PREFACE**

My interest in Middle Eastern and North African politics is both personal and scholarly. I am a native of the region and a long-time student of its politics. The popular uprisings that swept the region by the end of 2010 presented me with the opportunity to convert my interest into a meaningful contribution to the often understudied field of democratic transition in the region. Thus, this work is the culmination of a comparative study of the political outcomes of the Arab Spring in four different countries in the Middle East and North Africa. More specifically, it seeks to answer the following question: why has the outcome of the Syrian uprising been different, as of April 2014, from the outcomes of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya?

The work began as a directed research class with Dr. Edward Mihalkanin, who would later serve as my thesis committee chairman. This class and Dr. Mihalkanin's insights and suggestions culminated in a research paper that became the guideline in writing the following chapters. I hope the methodological approach adopted in this study and its findings will lay the foundation for future comparative studies of the politics of the Middle East and North Africa.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The current military conflict in Syria started as a part of the series of massive popular uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa beginning in December 2010. These uprisings culminated in the complete or partial overthrow of some political regimes in the region, or, at least, helped extract some sort of political reforms from others. In Syria, however, the uprising took a different route and escalated into a protracted civil war between the government forces and some of the opposition groups; before developing further into a proxy war between several regional and international state and sub-state actors. This war, which has claimed, so far, more than 120,000 casualties and displaced more than 4 million Syrians either internally or into several refugee camps across neighboring countries, does not seem to have an end looming on the horizon. Consequently, the conflict has reached an impasse; especially in the absence of a political solution acceptable to all parties to the conflict. Therefore, any attempt to prognosticate the outcome of the conflict and to envision the future political outlook of Syria would be a very difficult, if not impossible, task at this juncture. However, this situation does not preclude one from formulating different domestic conditions and international factors that might have had an effect on the conflict's outcome, or lack thereof, and that might have made the regime in Damascus immune to the changes which other regimes in the region were subjected to as a consequence of the popular uprisings.

This thesis seeks to investigate and answer the following question: why was the outcome of the Syrian uprising different from the outcomes of the uprisings in the other countries in the region? The methodological approach adopted to answer this question is

comparative and historical in nature. It relies on a frame of reference composed of Syria, on one hand, and Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, on the other hand. Two methodological points, however, need be made. The comparative approach adopted in this study is not only intended to enumerate the similarities and differences among the four countries, it is also designed to explain how those similarities and differences are relevant to providing a reasonable explanation to the question at hand. From the outset, it is important to stress that what is sought after in this study is a reasonable and provisional explanation rather than a definitive and complete explanation to the question of why the Syrian uprising did not follow the same path of the uprisings in the other three countries, despite the socioeconomic, institutional, and political similarities.

This low level of scrutiny was dictated by two major constraints. First, the subject of the study is an event which is still unfolding and may or may not, at the end, culminate in the same outcome as in the other three countries; namely a complete or partial overthrow of the political regime. Second, the information and data used in this project, especially those pertaining to drawing an approximation of the nature and characteristics of the inner circles of the regimes of the countries in question, are not completely accurate, at best. This predicament can be explained, among other things, by the secretive nature of said regimes. This state of affairs, thus, makes any hope for final and complete explanations, at this point, overly optimistic, to say the least.

The second methodological point, which is related to the first, concerns the testing of the findings of this study. Here again, since the Syrian conflict is still unfolding and since the conclusions of this study are mostly based on unquantifiable elements, the explanations given for the question at hand rely mainly on observing the presence or lack

of different factors in the four countries as well as on identifying how the development of some of these factors within the context of each country has contributed to the outcomes of the uprisings in these countries.

This study will begin by assessing the important literature dealing with the question at hand. Then, it will explicate the rationale for comparing Syria to the other three countries by enumerating the important similarities that might have suggested in the beginning of the Syrian uprising that its outcome would fall somewhere in between the outcomes of the other three uprisings. In addition, the study will recapitulate and reconstruct the timeline of events of the popular uprisings in all four countries and place them within the historical development of the political regimes and institutions in each country. Finally, the argument will be made that some of the conditions present in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were lacking in Syria, or vice versa; and that the regime in Syria benefited from some major factors that helped it survive the uprising and that these factors, on the other hand, were not available to the political regimes in the other three countries.

## CHAPTER II

### The Syrian Uprising: Literature Review

Given the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict and because the wave of popular uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a very recent event, scholarship addressing the subject is scarce and seldom comparative in nature. This state of affairs, however, does not preclude one from relying on a host of other valuable academic literature in order to answer the main question of this study. This literature deals primarily with what is known as the Arab world in the post-colonial period. It addresses, among other things, the historical development of the social and political structures and processes in MENA countries; especially those constituting the frame of reference in this study: Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

As for the literature pertaining to the Syrian conflict, two works deserve special attention, albeit for different reasons. The first is *The Syrian Rebellion*, by Fouad Ajami who is widely considered a leading authority on Arab politics. The book offers an account of the first year of the Syrian uprising; albeit replete with ambiguity, generalizations, and, at times, outright contradictions. Ajami dedicates the first chapter of his book to the nature of the current Syrian political system, with special attention to the Alawi community to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs. The author traces the current Syrian political regime to its founding in the aftermath of the Ba'athist coup of 1963. He argues that the main components of the regime are a reflection of the authoritarian structure set up by Bashar's father, Hafiz al-Assad, who seized power in 1970 after a period of intra-Ba'ath disputes. Ajami then concludes that, in order to effectively rule Syria, Bashar al-Assad, like his father before him, had to "have mastery

over the four pillars of political power- the Alawite community, the army, the security services, the Baath Party.”<sup>1</sup> Although Ajami’s assessment of the regime’s major pillars is accurate in terms of the army, the security apparatus, and the Ba’ath Party, he, nevertheless, overemphasizes the reliance of the Assads on their Alawi community to maintain their dominion over Syria and ensure the survival of their political regime. Ajami even goes a step further and contends that Syria is ruled by a sectarian regime par-excellence.<sup>2</sup> Central to his argument is the notion of *assabiyah* (group feeling) introduced by the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). According to Ajami, the Assad regime is predicated on the group feeling of the Alawites who “had a jumbled mix of persecution and superiority hammered into them by history.”<sup>3</sup> This feeling of superiority, the author argues, lies at “the heart of the antagonism between the Alawi mountain and the Sunni cities.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore and based on another maxim he borrowed from Ibn Khaldun which stipulated that “the common people always follow the religion of their rulers,” Ajami concludes that “[t]here was no possibility that the Syrian populace -Islamically devout and in the midst of an Arab-Islamic world awakening to the power of Islam- would follow a community of schismatics.”<sup>5</sup>

Few points, however, need be made about Ajami’s sectarian evaluation of the Syrian regime. First, it is not clear how Ibn Khaldun’s analysis and his notion of *assabiyah* are still relevant to describe the formation, the composition, or the operation of modern polities. It is true that Ibn Khaldun’s *assabiyah* is concomitant to the Durkheimian notions of group feeling or solidarity. Ajami, nonetheless, fails to mention,

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<sup>1</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Leland Stanford Junior University, 2012), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 13.

or maybe realize, that when the great medieval historian introduced that concept, he meant a specific kind of *assabiyah* or group feeling; he referred to it as *al-assabiyah al-kabaliyah* or tribal solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Khaldun's analysis and methodology was certainly applicable to describe the formation and the political life cycle of political dynasties during a period of time when the tribe was the social unit of analysis par-excellence. Although tribal loyalties are still a recurring phenomenon in some parts of the Middle East and North Africa, the tribe as a social unit and the loyalties it engenders began to dissipate in the early decades of the twentieth century in the wake of the formation of nation-states in the region. This process, as it were, gave rise to new kinds of loyalties such as the sense of belonging to, among other things, a nation, an ideology, a political party, or an economic class. These loyalties did not completely eradicate the traditional tribal loyalties; but did, however, break the hegemony that the tribe enjoyed as the determinant of polity formation in the region. Thus, Ajami's characterization of the Syrian regime as sectarian is methodologically untenable and reminiscent of what Nikolaos Van Dam called "anti-Alawi sectarian propaganda" that was disseminated by the likes of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat and Saudi king Fayssal in order to discredit the Assad regime during what became known in the 1970s as the Arab cold war.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Ajami's argument overlooks the demographic composition of the social power base of the Ba'athist regime. It is true that many Alawis occupy major positions in the regime's political and security apparatus. This reality, however, amounts

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Issawi, trans., *An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1406)* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1963), 103-106.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 93.

to nothing more than a correlation that is well short of proving any cause and effect relationship. Many non-Alawis occupied, and still occupy, crucial posts in the regime's hierarchy. One only needs mention the former Defense Minister Mustapha Tlass, who was considered by many historians of Syria as the right hand man of the elder Assad, and also former Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam as well as former foreign minister and current Vice-President Farouq al-Shara'a; all three are Sunnis. Moreover, the Assad regime consolidated its power and ensured its survival on an implicit cross-sectarian alliance that included, at one time, Sunni peasants in the 1970s after the implementation of land reform policies, urban Sunni merchants, as well as members of Syria's minority communities. Therefore, Ajami's contention vis-à-vis the sectarian nature of the Syrian regime ignores that the primordial prerequisite to join its ranks is, and has been, loyalty to the Ba'ath and the Assads, as opposed to being a member of a specific sect or community. In a later chapter, however, Ajami manages to contradict, or maybe rectify, his sectarian characterization of the Syrian regime. Drawing on a statement by Ismail al-Khalidi, a Sunni and head of the Coalition of Syrian Tribes, the author seems to have a change of conviction and concludes that "[t]he Alawis did not rule Syria, nor did the Ba'ath, . . . , the country was ruled by a gang of five men: Bashar, his brother Maher, and three of their maternal Makhoul relatives"<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Ajami seems to agree that, historically, the Assads were uncomfortable with any reference to their Alawi background. He argues that Hafiz himself "did his best to seem at one with the Sunni practice: he prayed in public, broke his fast during the month of Ramadan in the company of religious scholars, and displayed the piety expected

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<sup>8</sup> Ajami. *The Syrian Rebellion*, 126.

of a man who had come into dominion in a city so central to Islam as Damascus.”<sup>9</sup>

Ajami’s contention, however, cannot be reconciled with his earlier premise that “the common people always follow the religion of their rulers;” for in Syria, it was the ruler who always tried to assimilate to the religion of the common people.<sup>10</sup>

Ajami also carries his contradictions and ambiguities over to his analysis of the reasons behind the inability of the Syrian rebellion to bring about the fall of the regime. In his evaluation of the balance of power after the first year of the Syrian uprising, the author argues that “Damascus had not rebelled, the army had not defected, the economy had not collapsed, the regime was weak, and the opposition weaker.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he emphasizes two explanations for the deadlock of the Syrian conflict: the lack of a resolute international response in favor of the opposition and the passivity of Syria’s minority communities to join the ranks of the opposition. Although the two explanations are certainly valid and reflect the dynamics surrounding the Syrian conflict, especially in its first few months, Ajami’s treatment of these explanations lacks the analytical depth necessary to ascertain the causes behind both the lack of an international intervention in Syria and the reluctance of minority communities to join the Syrian rebels. With respect to the former, the author offers an account that is more descriptive than analytical for the absence of an international response a la Libya vis-à-vis Syria. He argues that “[t]here was resolve and genuine help offered by the friends of the Syrian regime –Russia, Iran, China, Hezbollah- and irresolution among the ranks of democracies and the ‘moderate’ Arab regimes.”<sup>12</sup> Except for the unfamiliarity with the Syrian opposition which Ajami

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<sup>9</sup> Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

refers to as an “alibi for American passivity,” he fails to discuss the strategic stakes and the geopolitical calculations behind the international and regional actors’ decisions to intervene or not in the Syrian conflict.<sup>13</sup>

As for the latter explanation, the author laments the passivity of Syria’s minorities to join the uprising against the regime. He contends that minorities in Syria, and particularly Christians, had chosen the “shield of the secular dictatorship” instead of embracing “the risks and reward of democratic politics.”<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding that important segments of Syria’s Sunni majority did not join the fight against the Syrian regime, the author’s reductionist and binary view discounts an important element expressed by many representatives of Syria’s Christian communities throughout the uprising. The reluctance of the majority of them to join the ranks of the opposition has little to do with their support of the regime or their aversion of democratic politics. They, as many other Syrians, were justifiably worried about the hijacking of the uprising by extreme elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Saudi and Qatari-backed Wahhabi groups.

Like Ajami, David Lesch also evaluates the first year of the Syrian uprising in his book *Syria: The Fall of The House of Assad*. Unlike Ajami, however, Lesch makes careful use of his fieldwork in Syria and the different interviews and discussions he had with prominent members of both the Syrian regime and the opposition, including Bashar al-Assad, to offer a strong scholarly account of the Syrian rebellion. After dedicating the first few chapters to the evaluation of Bashar’s performance at the helm of the regime he inherited from his father, the author embarks upon a discussion of some factors that

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<sup>13</sup> Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 191.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 115.

might have suggested in the beginning that Syria would be immune to the wave of uprisings in MENA. Chief among these factors is Syria's turbulent past which was marred by instability and multiple coups following the country's independence.

According to Lesch, "Syrians have generally disdained to engage in activities that could produce instability and chaos. They only have to look across their borders, on either side, toward Lebanon and Iraq –two countries that, like Syria, are ethnically and religiously sectarian- to see how political disorder can violently rip apart the fabric of society."<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the Syrian regime commands a great deal of loyalty from its institutional components. Bashar, who presided over a hierarchy he inherited from his father, "carefully maneuvered," in the first few years of his tenure, "his most loyal allies into the military-security apparatus, government ministries, and the Baath Party."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, unlike Egypt where the military institution generally kept its distance from the political leadership, "the fate of the military and security services is closely tied to that of the regime."<sup>17</sup>

Finally and unlike other leaders in MENA countries, "Bashar himself," Lesch argues, "used to be generally well liked in the country –or was not generally reviled. There were no WikiLeaks reports detailing the extravagant lifestyle of Assad –as there were with Tunisian President Ben Ali- because he does not have one."<sup>18</sup> For the author, however, all these factors could neither mask the prevalence in Syria of the same socioeconomic problems that plagued other MENA countries in the wake of the popular

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<sup>15</sup> David Lesch. *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 50-51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

uprisings, nor could they alleviate the sense of humiliation and loss of dignity many Syrians had due to decades of political repression.<sup>19</sup>

As for the outcome of the Syrian rebellion, the author highlights three important factors that contributed to the failure of the opposition to bring about the fall of the regime. The first factor deals with the security approach adopted by the regime and the ruthless repression that accompanied it. Lesch characterizes this approach as the “survival instincts” of the regime and an “institutional, convulsive response to perceived threats.”<sup>20</sup> Two important elements constituted the backbone of this security solution: the employment of the regime’s most loyal security and military units to crush the rebellion as well as the engagement in a “Machiavellian calibration of bloodletting –enough to do the job, but not enough to lose what international support remained.”<sup>21</sup>

The second factor is related to the disorganization of the Syrian opposition and the divisions among its different components. Lesch observes that it took several months into the conflict before the opposition groups were finally able to form the Syrian National Council; an umbrella organization representing the opposition. This council, which was mainly composed of exiled opposition groups and did not include important homegrown opposition groups, “did not give the impression at first of being a unified organization that was capable of mobilizing the opposition movement as a whole or of attracting international support.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the third factor that Lesch advances for the failure of the Syrian opposition to topple the regime deals with the international response to the uprising in the

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<sup>19</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 164-165.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

country. Here, the author reasoning was based on a meticulous enumeration of the different regional and international state and non-state actors as well as the complex strategic, geopolitical, and economic calculations involved with each of these actors' decision to support either party to, or to get directly involved in, the Syrian conflict.

With the exception of the inaccurate claim of the author that Syria ended its “support for [the Kurdish] PKK, and turned its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, over to the Turks;” for Ocalan was captured in Kenya in 15 February, 1999, Lesch's work is a good starting point for students of Syrian politics and can be adopted as a model for ascertaining the interplay of several domestic and international factors and their impact on the development and the endurance of political institutions in Syria and in MENA countries as well.<sup>23</sup>

This literature review uncovered the non-comparative nature of both Ajami's and Lesch's works. This state of affairs characterized most of the literature that dealt with the recent uprisings in MENA countries. This tendency to isolate the uprising in each country from the uprisings in other MENA countries resulted in gaining fewer insights into the different factors that led to the outcomes of the popular revolutions. The next chapter will be the first step towards the correction of this tendency. It will present a frame of reference composed of Syria and three other MENA countries where the popular uprisings were successful in overthrowing their respective political regimes.

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<sup>23</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 141.

## CHAPTER III

### **Building the Frame of Reference: Cultural, Political, and Economic**

#### **Similarities between Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya**

Taking Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya as a frame of reference stems both from the common social and economic factors present in all four countries as well as from the similarities of the Syrian regime and its political structure to those of the other three countries. These common factors and similarities suggest, at first glance, that the Syrian uprising would follow one of the paths of the uprisings in the other three countries and that its outcome would, at least, fall somewhere in between their outcomes. As for the common social factors, the most obvious one is that the popular uprisings in the four countries were part of a wave of anti-regime, pro-political reform mass demonstrations that swept, by the end of 2010, what is known as the Arab world, and that were particular to that geographic space. Referencing the particularity of these uprisings is not meant to dis-associate them from the other mass demonstrations that occurred around the world during the same time frame; whether in Greece, Spain, or the Occupy Movement in the United States. It is only used to highlight the particular intensity and outcome of the ‘Arab uprisings’ and the slogans that were raised during these uprisings.

Being part of the Arab world, the four countries that constitute the frame of reference share a cultural and historical context within which their societies and political institutions developed. First, most inhabitants of these countries share a sense of belonging to a broad Arab *ummah* (nation) that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. This sense of belonging is not only reinforced by a common language and religion; respectively Arabic and Islam, it is also due to several other factors. Chief

among these, according to James Gelvin, are the “sense of shared history and experiences” encouraged by intellectuals and school systems throughout the region; the existence of regional associations such as the League of Arab States; the lingering of some pan-Arab political parties like the Ba’ath; the widespread support of the Palestinian cause and opposition to U.S. foreign policy in the region; and the growth of Arabic broadcasting media such as the regionally popular satellite television channel Al-Jazeera.<sup>24</sup>

This shared Arab identity, however, is only one layer of identity shared by the inhabitants of the region. It should not obscure the other layers of identity such as belonging to a specific country in the region. As Gelvin argues,

“it is important to differentiate between, on the one hand, what might be called an ‘imagined Arab community’ that exists in the heads of those who identify themselves as Arab and, on the other, Arab nationalism, just because people might identify themselves as Arab does not mean they necessarily want to renounce their Egyptian or Lebanese citizenship, for example, in favor of citizenship in a pan-Arab state. As a matter of fact, the (pan-) Arab nationalism of the 1950s, which political leaders of the time encouraged mainly for strategic purposes, has for the most part dissipated over the decades as more and more people have come to identify with the states in which they live.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the shared Arab identity should not neglect the reality that what is known as the Arab world is not a homogeneous or monolithic entity; for there are several linguistic and religious communities throughout the region. Although Arabic is the *lingua franca* of most inhabitants of the region, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa contain communities that speak languages other than Arabic. With respect to the four countries in the frame of reference, Tunisia and Libya contain large Berber-speaking

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<sup>24</sup>James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2-3.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 3.

populations. Syria, on the other hand, is home to Kurdish-speaking as well as Aramaic-speaking communities. Religiously, although most inhabitants of the region are Muslims and profess the Sunni branch of Islam, they, however, follow one or many of the four *madhahib fiqhiya* (jurisprudential schools of interpretation) within the Sunni branch. In Tunisia and Libya, for example, the predominant school of interpretation is Maliki; whereas in Egypt and Syria, the other three schools, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi'i, are equally prevalent. Moreover, the region contains populations belonging to other branches of Islam; such as the Shias, Ismaili, Druze, and Alawis in Syria. Finally, there are other religious populations in the region; like the substantial Christian communities in Egypt and Syria.

In addition to these linguistico-religious similarities, other factors suggested that the Syrian uprising would take the same path as the uprisings in the other three countries. Chief among these factors is the existence in Syria of certain socio-economic conditions that some analysts advanced as the main reasons behind the vulnerability of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Like all countries that had their encounter with colonialism, most countries in MENA were devastated by their colonial condition at many levels. Economically, and as was the case in the other three countries, the Syrian state that emerged after independence from France in 1946 was by far the major player in the country's economy. This economic omnipotence led these states to become what David Lesch called "classic Bonapartist states;" where "economic policy was primarily driven by regime survival, especially in a regional environment that was anything but benevolent."<sup>26</sup> This state of affairs, among other things, led to the creation of some sort of a ruling bargain or social contract between state apparatuses and the populations of these

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<sup>26</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 6.

countries. These ruling bargains, as it were, required the regimes to “establish adequate safety nets, and to provide employment, education and social services in return for compliance and obedience (if not obeisance).”<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, the ruling bargains constituted the blue print of economic policies pursued by these countries during the decades following their independence. Several factors, furthermore, contributed to the lingering of these economic policies. The great powers encouraged them as in the case of the United States which “believe[d] that a combination of economic development and welfare would create stable pro-Western states” in order to curb any potential Soviet influence in the region during the Cold War.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, these economic policies were recommended, or dictated, by the international financial institutions both as a condition to acquire grants and loans and as the prescription offered by the dominant economic model which “gave pride of place to full employment and rising standards of living as the two indicators of economic success. Governments, it was believed, could guide resources to ensure both goals were reached more effectively in environments where markets were not well developed.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, the states in the region were able to sustain these economic policies due to their access to substantial rent income. This rent, which derives from “petroleum resources, gas resources, geostrategic utility, and control of critical transit facilities,” helped the state

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<sup>27</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

apparatuses in these countries keep their end of the ruling bargain they struck with their respective populations, especially during the first few decades after their independence.<sup>30</sup>

For the last three decades, however, and as was the case in the other three countries, the Syrian regime's ability to sustain its part of the ruling bargain was tremendously hindered. Two events led to this development. First, the decline in the price of oil during the late 1970s and early 1980s substantially decreased these countries' profits from their most lucrative source of rent. Second, Neoliberalism became the new dominant international economic paradigm; replacing the post-World War II Keynesian model within the framework of which the economic policies of these countries were prescribed and pursued. This paradigmatic shift in the international economic model, coupled with the debt crisis that plagued MENA countries in the early 1980s, saw the ruling regimes scramble to implement neoliberal economic policies. As a result, these regimes were required by the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to drastically curb their role in the economy of their respective countries by cutting state expenditures, privatizing state industries and assets, as well as engaging in structural adjustment programs as a precondition for both debt relief and further access to grants and loans.

These policies, which were intended to transform the economies in these countries from state-controlled to market-driven, led to two contradictory consequences. First, they allowed the political regimes to retain control of the economic resources, albeit indirectly. The process of privatizing state assets and industries was utilized to broaden the power bases of the regimes and to create a class of crony capitalists many of whom were already

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<sup>30</sup> Eva Bellin, "Coercive Institutions and Coercive Leaders," in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, ed. Marsha Posusney and Michele Angrist (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 32.

tied to these regimes through familial relations. In Egypt, for example, “a friend of the son of the president came to control 60 percent of the steel industry, while in Syria the first cousin of the president gained control over the mobile communications giant SyriaTel, which in turn, controlled 55 percent of the market. Both became symbols of regime corruption during the uprising.”<sup>31</sup> Second, by reducing the states’ control over economic activities and hindering their capacity to fulfill their end of the ruling bargains, these policies exacerbated the level of disenchantment of the majority of a population that, already, felt alienated from the ruling regime. Consequently, what Philip Khoury called the “gap between assimilation and mobilization was widening constantly over the last three decades; for “[y]ouths all over the Arab world are being mobilized everyday – by being educated. They are led to believe that this education will lead to a decent job, allowing them to make enough money to eke out a living, have a family and even have a future. But they are not getting these things: they are not being assimilated.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, in the wake of the popular uprisings, most of the socio-economic indices in MENA countries were similarly troubling. In Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, approximately one third of the population was between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine. More importantly, the percentage of the unemployed among this segment of the population, especially those with college degrees, was identically high in these four countries. In addition, Syria was vulnerable to the same food crisis that hit the other three countries and much of MENA in the second half of the last decade. This food crisis manifested itself in the steep increases in the prices of basic foodstuffs. As a result, the

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<sup>31</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 45.

portion of household spending that went towards paying for food reached more than 50 percent across MENA, including the four countries in question.

Politically, the ruling regimes that emerged in Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in the post-colonial period had four common features. All four regimes reproduced bureaucratic apparatuses similar to the highly centralized colonial administrations. In addition, the political leaders exhibited a great deal of paternalism and often addressed their populations in their speeches as ‘my children’. Furthermore, the political leadership is characterized by proximity to the president; and thus, “[r]egardless of occupational designation or formal title, those who live closest to the leader regularly hold major political positions.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, the decision-making process in these four countries took place in a highly informal environment that lacked “institutional foundations and formal supports.”<sup>34</sup> In this environment, “it is difficult for opposition forces to concentrate because targets are neither stable nor well defined. At the same time, the leader enjoys a broad capacity to intervene in governmental affairs and to move subordinates around with ease.”<sup>35</sup>

These features, ultimately, helped consolidate the authoritarian structures of the political regimes throughout MENA and in particular in Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, in and out of themselves, these features cannot explain the endurance of authoritarianism in the region and its exceptional resistance to democratic transition contrary to former authoritarian regimes in other regions of the world.<sup>36</sup> The durability of authoritarianism in the four countries can be attributed to what Eva Bellin called the

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<sup>33</sup> James Bill and Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 163.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Bellin, “Coercive Institutions,” 21.

“robustness of their coercive apparatuses;” which in turn can be explained by four variables.<sup>37</sup> First, these countries’ access to rentier income allowed them to maintain a fiscal health strong enough to sustain the payment of their militaries and security forces; and, thus, prevent any potential disintegration from within.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the coercive apparatuses in these countries are characterized by patrimonial or non-institutional organization which, unlike institutionalization, “will spell less receptivity to political opening” and reform.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the longevity of authoritarianism in these countries is a function of the maintenance or withdrawal of international support.<sup>40</sup> “This scenario,” Bellin argues, “proved key in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet Union’s withdrawal of support for the Brezhnev Doctrine spelled the end of the coercive backbone of these regimes and their will to hold on. It also proved important in Latin America, where the United States’ abrupt shift away from supporting authoritarianism in the post-Cold War era dealt many regimes an important existential blow.”<sup>41</sup>

Authoritarian regimes in MENA, including the four countries in the frame of reference, “did not see their sources of international patronage evaporate with the end of the Cold War nor with the United States’ subsequent reanimation with democracy;” mainly because “Western interest in the region has been driven by multiple security concerns that have survived the Cold War.”<sup>42</sup> This point was echoed by Jason Brownlee who noticed that “even before September 11, 2001, U.S. support for pluralism rarely extended to Muslim states in the Middle East, especially when Israel, oil resources, and

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<sup>37</sup> Bellin, “Coercive Institutions,” 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 32.

perceived Islamic threat were involved. Consequently, authoritarian states in the region may present regimes where ‘the status quo is so vital to American interests that it must not be disturbed’.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the endurance of authoritarianism in the four countries is also due to the relatively low level of popular mobilization for political reform; which keeps the cost of regimes’ repression, subsequently, relatively low.<sup>44</sup>

During the few decades preceding the recent popular uprisings, the authoritarian structures in the four countries gave rise to what Roger Owen called “presidential security states” where the basic function is to maintain, at all times, a president for life.<sup>45</sup> In a note of sarcasm, people throughout MENA coined the neologism ‘*joumloukiya*’, which is a combination of the words republic and monarchy, to describe these regimes. The presidential security state in the four countries, moreover, has three main and intertwined components: the presidency, the military and security apparatus, and a class of cronies.

As for the presidency, the concept describes a tight and secretive nexus that included “the presidential office, the presidential family, and a small group of advisers drawn from the military, the security forces, and the business elite.”<sup>46</sup> According to Owen, the development of the presidency in the four countries in question usually went through two stages. First, there was the concentration of power stage where strong and coup-proof regimes were established.<sup>47</sup> Then, there was the personification of power

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<sup>43</sup> Jason Brownlee, “Political Crisis and Restabilization: Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia,” in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, ed. Marsha Posusney and Michele Angrist (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 59.

<sup>44</sup> Bellin, “Coercive Institutions,” 34.

<sup>45</sup> Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

stage where the presidents took advantage of the secretive nature of the presidency to cultivate a cult of personality that portrayed them as “omniscient and indispensable.”<sup>48</sup>

The presidency in these regimes relied heavily on the military and a tight network of security services in order to compensate for their lack of popular legitimacy. These security services, which were the ultimate source for domestic protection, served both to repress any potential domestic unrest as well as to keep a watchful eye on other members of the regime aspiring to challenge the president. The third component of these regimes is the class of cronies. By controlling the major economic resources and strategic industries, the regimes in the four countries created an elite class comprised usually of the president’s immediate relatives, his close associates, and members of the business elite. The members of this vanguardist elite were “united by money, the exchange of favors, generally a common interest in particular economic policies, and, most important of all, a president who was willing to see to the preservation of their interests even after he died.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the cultural, economic, and political similarities present in all four countries, some factors suggested that the Syrian uprising would culminate in a relatively peaceful overthrow of the regime like the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia; whereas others suggested that it would embark upon a path of an armed conflict, as in Libya, before the Assad regime is toppled. The former stemmed from the presence in Syria, like in Tunisia and in Egypt, of few organized opposition groups that have the potential to capitalize on the mass demonstrations and the energies of the protesters. The latter were based on the historical record of the Syrian regime when confronted by political unrest. In February

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<sup>48</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

1982, for example, the regime, under the elder Assad, did not hesitate to brutally crush a revolt of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama causing the death of thousands of people, mostly civilians.

After identifying the similarities present in the four countries, it is necessary to place these similarities within the context of each country and to ascertain the historical development as well as the extent to which they influenced the unfolding of their respective popular uprisings. Thus, a historical recapitulation of the popular uprisings and a reconstruction of their linkage to the similarities shared by the four countries is an important step in the path of answering the question of why the Syrian uprising did not culminate in the same outcome as the other three countries.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Regimes, Oppositions, and Uprisings: A Historical Perspective**

The popular uprisings that swept MENA countries in the beginning of 2011 sought to overthrow long-standing authoritarian regimes in these countries. These regimes, which mostly had their origins in the period following their respective countries' independence, went through different stages before establishing a robust political structure that contributed both to the endurance of the political regimes as well as the lack of meaningful challenges to the rule of these regimes. Thus, in order to determine the factors behind the uniqueness of the Syrian uprising, it is necessary to track the historical development, the nature, and the major components of the regime's political structure in the four countries and to reconstruct the timeline of the popular uprisings. This reconstruction process will be conducted in the same chronological order as the popular uprisings, starting with Tunisia.

#### The Tunisian Political Regime: Origin, Development, and Nature

The Tunisian political regime that was toppled by the popular uprising in January 2011 had its origin in the few months after the country's independence. In July 1957, three months after France terminated its protectorate over Tunisia, then-Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba and his popular Neo-Destour Party abolished the hereditary monarchy that was established by the Hussainid dynasty in 1705. Soon after and taking advantage of his charisma and reputation as *al-mujahid al-akbar* (supreme combatant) against the French rule, Bourguiba appointed himself as the president of the newly established Tunisian republic. After eliminating his political opponents, some of whom were his former colleagues in the Neo-Destour, Bourguiba consolidated himself as the country's

supreme leader. His supremacy was institutionalized in the Tunisian constitution of 1959; thus, setting the first building blocks of an authoritarian political structure that dominated the country for over five decades.

Although the initial drafts of the 1959 Tunisian constitution were leaning towards the establishment of a parliamentary political system, the final text, however, reflected both Bourguiba's political ambitions and his triumph over his opponents.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the constitution established a presidential system that put much of the executive and legislative powers in the hands of the president and limited the authority of the parliament to only "censor[ing] ministers, forcing their removal, but could do so only if it could muster a two-thirds majority (an extremely unlikely occurrence given the Neo-Destour's domination of the electoral process)."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the only meaningful constitutional check on the president's power, which consisted of limits on presidential terms, was removed in 1975 when Bourguiba was proclaimed president for life. Bourguiba, thus, was, in effect, the founder of the first version of what became known in MENA as *joumloukiya* (republic-monarchy). As Michael Hudson argues, Bourguiba was "both more and less than a king: more, in that he has generated his own political religion, Bourguibism, with himself at the center (and in which the scriptures of socialism and democracy are subordinate); but less, in that he has systematically undermined the traditional values which would normally legitimize a monarch."<sup>52</sup>

Bourguiba's hegemony over the political life in Tunisia did not go unchallenged. The two most important challenges came as a reaction to an underperforming Tunisian

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<sup>50</sup> Nathan Brown, *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Law and the Prospects for Accountable Government* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 383.

economy. Like many leaders of newly independent countries, Bourguiba pursued a nationalist-socialist economic agenda during the first decade of his rule. This choice was, furthermore, reflected in the renaming of his party from the Neo-Destour to *Parti Socialiste Destourien* (Destour Socialist Party- PSD).<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the Tunisian state dominated much of the country's economy during this period. It organized agricultural cooperatives after re-appropriating the lands controlled by French colonizers; it nationalized the banking system, utilities, and transportation; and monopolized major industries and mining, including the extraction of modest amounts of crude oil.

Although the Tunisian economy achieved healthy growth rates in most sectors throughout the decade, this growth came at the expense of an exponentially growing national debt. Faced with this reality, Bourguiba decided in 1969 to put an end to the socialist experimentation and to move Tunisia towards a liberal market economy. This transition, however, was not as smooth as Bourguiba had envisioned. As the privatization of state assets was unfolding, only few wealthy Tunisians, most of whom affiliated with the PSD, benefited from this process; thus, exacerbating the already existing disparities between rich and poor.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the imposition of high tariffs on Tunisian products by the European Economic Community in 1977 led many plants and factories to close down; resulting in a dramatic increase in unemployment in the country.<sup>55</sup>

In order to protest the failure of Bourguiba's economic policies and their impact on the Tunisian society in general, and on wage earners in particular, Tunisia's oldest and largest labor union, *Union Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT), called for a

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<sup>53</sup> Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

general strike on January 26, 1978. In response to this call, thousands of Tunisians filled the streets of cities throughout the country to demand economic reform as well as political pluralism. Bourguiba and his regime responded with unrestrained violence to the protests; killing several dozens of protesters in what became known in Tunisia as Black Thursday.<sup>56</sup> Six years later, in January 1984, anti-government demonstrations broke out all over the country to protest the increase in the price of foodstuffs due to IMF's and the World Bank's demands to the Tunisian government to lift its subsidies on basic food commodities.<sup>57</sup> As in 1978, Bourguiba did not hesitate to use both the police and the army to brutally crush the demonstrations. During this period of social and political unrest, a high-ranking security officer, Zine al-Abidine Ben-Ali, gained prominence for his role in quelling the anti-government protests. As a result, Ben-Ali was promoted by Bourguiba to the post of interior minister and soon after prime minister, a move that proved fatal for Bourguiba's political future.

On November 7, 1987, and less than a month after assuming the post of prime minister, Ben-Ali orchestrated a 'medical coup' by ousting the 83 year-old Bourguiba on the constitutional grounds of incapacity. Initially, Ben-Ali sought to distance himself from the policies of his predecessor by "freeing thousands of prisoners, encouraging political exiles to return, renouncing the notion of presidency for life, and promising the revival of political pluralism."<sup>58</sup> Ben-Ali went even further to change the name of the governing PSD to *le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique* (Constitutional Democratic Rally- RCD). This display of inclusiveness, however, did not last long. Ben-Ali was set to put his own imprint on the authoritarian political structure he inherited

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<sup>56</sup> Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, 165.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>58</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 75.

from his predecessor. Thus, starting in 1989, Ben-Ali put on track a twofold strategy in order to consolidate his power over the country. First, he took advantage of his military and security background and the skills he acquired by attending both a French military training after the country's independence as well as the American Security and Intelligence School in Baltimore to set up a new security network under his control.<sup>59</sup> This network allowed him to further coup-proof his regime and to keep other state security agencies, especially the military, at bay. At the time, Ben-Ali was not aware that his strategy will have a substantial effect on the outcome of the uprising that would end his rule two decades later.

In addition to cementing his rule over the state's institutions, Ben-Ali employed several constitutional maneuvers that practically guaranteed him the Tunisian presidency for life. In the first three post-Bourguiba presidential elections, Ben-Ali used a constitutional provision that made it very difficult for anyone to run against him, except for few token candidates.<sup>60</sup> One of these candidates famously, or infamously, claimed that he casted his own vote for Ben-Ali.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Ben-Ali was able, in 2002, to amend the constitution in order to abolish presidential term limits; "cleverly permitting [himself] to stand for an indefinite number of future elections without actually going so far as to name him president for life."<sup>62</sup>

Ben-Ali also reneged on his initial promise of inclusiveness and pluralism. He continued, instead, his predecessor's policy of repressing the domestic opposition. In addition to imprisonment and exile, his regime also resorted to rule tinkering to keep the

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<sup>59</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 76.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>62</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 77.

opposition at bay. Thus, during the parliamentary elections, which were already closely monitored by the ministry of interior, Ben-Ali employed an electoral system that “granted all the seats in any particular constituency to the party that won most votes.”<sup>63</sup> Ben-Ali’s RCD was granted most and sometimes all the seats in the Tunisian parliament. Although he was successful at sidelining his domestic opponents, some popular opposition parties and organizations remained very active throughout his tenure, especially the Islamist Ennahda, the Tunisian Workers Communist Party, the Congress for the Republic, and the trade union UGTT. These groups maintained an organizational structure that proved very crucial in channeling the public’s discontent during the popular uprising.

Ben-Ali’s control also extended to the Tunisian economy. He extensively used state resources both to increase his own personal wealth and as a source of patronage and co-optation for important members of the security apparatus and privileged elements of the crony business class.<sup>64</sup> Under the pretext of implementing neoliberal economic policies, he allowed many of his relatives and close associates to make huge fortunes through the privatization of state assets, the transfer of public land, and the operation of major public services.<sup>65</sup> As a result, social tensions grew between a privileged elite and a population that suffered, throughout the last decade, from increasing costs of living and high unemployment rates, especially among the young and university graduates.

### The Tunisian Uprising

Although it is difficult to determine the impact of the growing social tensions that plagued Tunisia during the last decade on the start of the popular uprising, the single event that sparked the beginning of the revolt was directly related to these tensions. On

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<sup>63</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 76.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty six year-old street vendor, set himself on fire in the city of Sidi Bouzid, which is located some 190 miles south of the capital Tunis, as a protest against the local police who confiscated the vegetable cart he operated to support his family of eight. Bouazizi's self-immolation triggered days of unrest in Sidi Bouzid and other major cities in the country. Initially, the demands of the protesters were, in general, of an economic nature. However, several opposition parties and labor unions played a major role in channeling the anger of the demonstrators and in raising the ceiling of their demands. Suddenly, the uprising took a major turn and demanded the ousting of Ben-Ali's regime.

The regime's response to the events was of a mixed nature. Ben-Ali had multiple media appearances where he paternalistically addressed the Tunisian people promising national dialogue, political reform, and the creation of thousands of new jobs. At the same time, he used his security services, especially the police, to attempt to quell the protests which remained peaceful throughout the uprising. These tactics, however, proved too late to intimidate a massive popular movement that already crossed the point of no return. Thus, after the unrests reached the capital, tens of thousands of people challenged an established curfew on January 12, 2011. Following this particular incident, the army's chief of staff, General Rachid Ammar, refused to carry out the president's orders to fire at the crowds of demonstrators. Two days later, the seventy-four year-old Ben-Ali fled to Saudi Arabia; thus becoming the first president ousted by a popular uprising in the history of the modern MENA.

### The Egyptian Political Regime: Origin, Development, and Nature

Egypt fits a similar profile as Tunisia with only few differences. As in Tunisia, the authoritarian political structure that was toppled by the popular uprising in 2011 went through different stages; with each reflecting the personal imprints and leadership style of the individual at the helm. Hosni Mubarak's regime had its origin in the 1952 Revolution. Under the leadership of Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the Free Officers Movement overthrew the monarchy and established a republic where the military dominated, for decades, both the political and economic realms in Egypt. After a short period of internal disputes, between the members of the Free Officers Movement over the principles and agenda of the ensuing political system, Nasser emerged as the undisputed leader of a country that would embark upon the first phase of an authoritarian structure which lasted for six decades.

As a prime minister during the first few years following the revolution, Nasser exerted his influence and control over the Revolutionary Command Council. This control culminated in Nasser assuming all executive powers after deposing his colleague, President Naguib, in 1954 and putting him under house arrest. In the same year, he also crushed the Muslim Brotherhood, after the movement orchestrated an assassination attempt against him. As a result, Nasser was able to sideline the best organized opposition group that could mount a serious challenge to the military's rule and Nasser's in particular. Following a popular referendum in 1956, Nasser assumed the presidency and the country adopted a new constitution. This new document constituted a major departure from the 1923 constitution. If the early constitutional experiment "built in a rivalry between the monarch and the popularly elected parliament," the 1956 constitution institutionalized the Nasserite phase of authoritarianism in Egypt and set up a

presidentially-dominated system where “constitutional guarantees and freedoms (most of which were to be defined and regulated by law) lost whatever limited force they had previously held.”<sup>66</sup>

Nasser did not rely solely on constitutional tinkering to consolidate his power. He also was a charismatic leader who employed a populist ideology and who knew how to exploit Egypt’s geostrategic position in order to navigate the regional and international political environment. Consequently, Nasser enjoyed widespread popular support rarely seen by other authoritarian regimes in the modern MENA. His ideology was a mixture of pan-Arabism and Third-World socialism. Despite being a staunch anti-communist, Nasser implemented an economic program predicated on land reform and mass-scale nationalization. The combination of these two programs “resulted in around 75 percent of Egypt’s gross domestic product (GDP) being transferred from the hands of the country’s rich either to the state or to millions of small owners.”<sup>67</sup>

Nasser’s charisma and popularity reached its zenith during the Suez Canal crisis of 1956. This crisis illustrates perfectly how the international political environment can affect the endurance of authoritarian political structures. The crisis, which was triggered by Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal, led to a tripartite military attack on Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel. Nasser’s ability to withstand the attack won him an unsurmountable amount of political capital, enough to sustain his authoritarian rule for years to come. In the eyes of the majority of Egyptians, he became the eternal national hero and throughout MENA, Nasser’s Egypt became the model to emulate. Rashid Khalidi captures best this moment when he argues that the aftermath of the Suez crisis

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<sup>66</sup> Brown, *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World*, 79.

<sup>67</sup> Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 47.

established Nasser as “the pre-eminent Arab leader until the end of his life, and Arab nationalism as the leading Arab ideology for at least that long. Suez also gave a final push to the tottering hegemony over the Arab world which Britain and France had sometimes shared and sometimes disputed over a century.”<sup>68</sup> Nasser’s popularity remained intact even after Egypt’s defeat by Israel in 1967. Following this military debacle, he resigned from the presidency, but millions of Egyptians poured to the streets demanding that he stay in power. Nasser reversed his decision and re-assumed the post of president until his death in 1970; which put an end to the first phase of authoritarianism in Egypt.

After Nasser’s death, Vice-President Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat assumed the presidency and initiated the second phase of authoritarianism in Egypt. Despite being a veteran of the 1952 revolution and a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, Sadat was, by no means, a clear favorite to succeed his predecessor. His ascension to power was more a result of the power vacuum created by Nasser’s death than it is a reflection of his influence within the inner circle of the regime.<sup>69</sup> Sadat lacked the charisma, the popularity, and the support his predecessor enjoyed both among the Egyptian people and within the political establishment. In order to compensate for his lack of political capital, he was aware that his stay in power was predicated on introducing new dynamics into the political structure established by Nasser. The October 1973 war with Israel provided him with the opportunity to do just that and even more.

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<sup>68</sup> Rashid Khalidi, “Consequences of the Suez Crisis in the Arab World,” in *The Modern Middle East*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary Wilson (Los Angeles: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1993), 535.

<sup>69</sup> Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 117.

In the aftermath of the war, which was perceived as a victory by most Egyptians, Sadat was able to escape the shadow of Nasser and become the popular hero who was able to cross the Suez Canal and to destroy the vaunted and heavily fortified Israeli defensive Bar-Lev Line.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, Sadat took advantage of the massive political capital he acquired to embark upon what Raymond Hinnebush called the “de-Nasserization” of the Egyptian political regime.<sup>71</sup> This process was reflected in a set of policies that constituted the bulk of Sadat’s *al-infitah* (openness) agenda.

Economically, *al-infitah* was a sincere departure from the populist economic policies of Nasser. It allowed Sadat to open the Egyptian economy to free trade and foreign investments; and therefore to reduce the state’s hegemony over the economy. Politically, however, *al-infitah* was an innovative strategy pursued by Sadat to legitimize his regime without altering its authoritarian substance. Therefore, *al-infitah* was an Orwellian manipulation of the concept of openness *par-excellence*. It allowed Sadat to integrate several opposition groups through the implementation of a multi-party system and elections, albeit controlled and dominated by his newly-established National Democratic Party (NDP). The strategy presented Sadat’s regime also with the opportunity to “build its own power base, to reward its cronies and allies and to create a capitalist class whose loyalties were not to free markets and open economies –and certainly not to democracy- but rather to the regime itself.”<sup>72</sup> Sadat’s strategy was developed even further during the third phase of authoritarianism in Egypt under Mubarak.

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<sup>70</sup> Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 117.

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Hinnebush, “The Foreign Policy of Egypt,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebush and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 97.

<sup>72</sup> Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 118.

In October 1981, Sadat was assassinated by a group of soldiers while attending a military parade commemorating the achievements of the 1973 war. After this incident, his vice-president and fellow military officer, Muhammad Hosni Mubarak, ascended to power to become the fourth president of modern Egypt. Although Mubarak based his rule upon the same structure and processes inherited from his predecessor, he was able to put his own imprint on the authoritarian regime in the country. In order to consolidate his power and to keep the opposition at bay, Mubarak employed both coercive tactics as well as constitutional maneuvering. During his tenure, he relied on the 1967 State of Emergency Law which allowed him to expand the state's security and police forces; especially the vaunted *Mabaheth Amn al-Dawlah*, Egypt's equivalent of the FBI, and the anti-riot and containment forces.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, Mubarak continued his predecessor's strategy of regime legitimation using the NDP as his main device. In a series of rigged elections, which resulted in the NDP controlling most of the seats of the Egyptian parliament, the regime intended to portray an image of inclusiveness and political pluralism. Electoral fraud, however, was not the only method employed by the regime in the pursuit of its strategy. Mubarak perfected the practice of election engineering, rule tinkering, and constitutional maneuvering to bestow popular legitimacy on his regime. This can be illustrated by the regime's use of several electoral laws that always insured a healthy outcome and a sizable advantage for the NDP. One of these laws implemented a proportional representation system with a high threshold that "required that a party poll eight percent of the vote nationally in order to win seats in any particular constituency. Moreover, small parties' votes that could not be used to obtain seats would accrue to the largest party, i.e. the

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<sup>73</sup> Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 170.

National Democratic Party (NDP) instead.”<sup>74</sup> In addition to these benign tactics, Mubarak did not hesitate to use his security apparatus throughout his tenure to intimidate and to keep the opposition in check. Despite these repressive tactics, the country managed to keep an active and a well organized opposition that was able to play a crucial role in deciding the outcome of the 2011 uprising.

Economically, Mubarak followed his predecessor’s policies of opening up the country to free trade and foreign investments; albeit cautiously during the first decade of his rule. This cautious approach was meant to avoid any drastic disturbance of the state’s ability to provide subsidies for housing and basic foodstuffs to the largest and one of the poorest populations in MENA. By the end of the 1980s, however, and due to the underperformance of the Egyptian economy and the exponential rise in the country’s public debt, Mubarak expedited the process of privatizing the state’s assets and resources. This process was the first step in the path of implementing the structural adjustments required by the IMF and the World Bank as a condition for more loans. Under the guise of implementing these policies, Mubarak used state assets as a source of enrichment and patronage for his relatives, close associates, and prominent members of the government and the NDP. As a result, the already existing gap between a crony elite and the largest segment of the Egyptian society was widening. This situation was exacerbated during the last decade due to the rise of the cost of living and a high unemployment rate, especially among university graduates. The widespread economic and political corruption was accompanied by a growing discontent among large segments of the Egyptian society who

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<sup>74</sup> Marsha Posusney, “Behind the Ballot Box: Electoral Engineering in the Arab World,” *Middle East Report*, no. 209 (Winter 1998): 14.

began to call for political and economic reforms. These calls created a momentum that was carried all the way to the start of the popular uprising in January 2011.

### The Egyptian Uprising

Although it is difficult to determine the impact of the Tunisian uprising on the events that subsequently took place in Egypt, there is, nonetheless, ample evidence that several Egyptian opposition groups were engaged, since the start of the last decade, in massive and well-organized grassroots efforts that served to prepare them for an eventual showdown with the regime. First, there was the *kefaya* (enough) movement which was established in 2004 as a cosmopolitan political movement drawing support from all components of the Egyptian opposition. The movement called for, among other things, Mubarak's resignation, political reform, amelioration of human rights in the country, and drawing clear lines between political power and economic wealth. There was also the April 6 Movement, founded in 2008. This movement, which was composed mainly of university students, was inspired by the Serbian opposition's nonviolent tactics that were instrumental in toppling Slobodan Milosevic. In response to this growing activism, Mubarak's regime did not hesitate to crackdown on the opposition using its police and security forces to imprison and torture anyone suspected of political dissent. This systematic repression only emboldened the opposition. A few days after the ousting of the Tunisian president, calls were posted on social media for anti-regime demonstrations throughout Egypt.

On January 25, 2011, a day that coincided with National Police Day which was "a newly proclaimed holiday that celebrated its widely despised namesake,"<sup>75</sup> thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and other major cities in the country

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<sup>75</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 45.

chanting in one voice: *al-sha'b yourid isqat al-nizam* (the people want the fall of the regime). Throughout the uprising, the Egyptian opposition showed a great deal of discipline and organizational skills. The organizers of the demonstrations sought to occupy strategic areas in cities around the country in order to showcase the massive popular support. Cognizant of these tactics, Mubarak's regime tried to keep, without success, tens of thousands protesters from occupying the strategic Tahrir Square in Cairo. The square became quickly the center point of the popular uprising and the symbolic site of the power struggle between the regime and the demonstrators who refused to leave before all their demands were met.

Moreover and despite having very diverse ideological, political, and religious backgrounds, the protesters and opposition groups managed to maintain their unity and focus on the ultimate goal of regime change. They avoided displaying any sign of division that could be exploited by the regime. This unity was manifested throughout Egypt; especially in Tahrir Square where, for example, Christians protected the site during the Muslim Friday prayers, while Muslims attended Christian multi-faith masses on Sundays. Furthermore, and understanding the role of the media in modern politics, the protesters were very creative in using modern technology and all kinds of communication devices in order to coordinate their efforts domestically and to bring their revolution under international spotlights. Throughout the uprising, the demonstrators employed internet blogs and social media as a way to communicate and gather more domestic support. In addition, videos portraying regime violence against peaceful demonstrations were disseminated by the protesters on the internet in order to bring international pressure on the regime.

Like Ben-Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak used a mixed strategy to respond to the uprising. On one hand and in an attempt to show he was prepared to do whatever it took to stay in power, Mubarak dispatched his security forces who kidnapped and tortured many demonstrators. He also deployed the riot police with batons and live ammunition to attack the crowds of protesters. On the other hand, he offered national dialogue with representatives of the demonstrators; reshuffled his cabinet; pledged not to run for another presidential term; and delegated some of his powers to the head of his intelligence services, General Omar Suleiman, whom he also appointed to the hitherto vacant office of vice-president. These tactics only signaled to the persistent and disciplined protesters that Mubarak's back was on the proverbial wall. Thus, on February 11, 2011, one day after a television address where he insisted he would not step down, the 82 year-old Mubarak resigned to become, therefore, the second president ousted by a popular uprising in the modern MENA.

#### The Libyan Political Regime: Origin, Development, and Nature

In Libya, the authoritarian political structure that ruled the country was different in two major aspects from those in Egypt and Tunisia. First, unlike the other two countries, Libya illustrates the dynamics and tensions between tribal politics and nation-state formation during the post-colonial period in MENA. Second, the authoritarian regime that was toppled by the 2011 uprising skipped the multi-stage process that characterized both Tunisia and Egypt and was from the beginning a one-man affair. The first aspect of Libyan politics started taking shape immediately after the end of Italy's occupation of the three geographic areas that constitute modern day Libya. Following the Allied victories that drove Germany and Italy out of North Africa in 1943, Great Britain

established military administrations in the eastern and western Libyan provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania respectively; while France established its own in the southern province of Fezzan. Six years later, the two countries presented the United Nations with the Bevin-Sforza Plan to create ten-year trusteeships for the three provinces. A resolution based on the plan, however, was defeated at the U.N. General Assembly; setting the stage for the formal independence of the three provinces and the creation of the United Kingdom of Libya in 1951.<sup>76</sup>

The establishment of the kingdom was not, nevertheless, concomitant to the formation of a strong national identity among the inhabitants of the three provinces. King Idriss al-Sanusi experienced, first hand, the difficulties involved with the transition from a decentralized tribal setting to a centralized modern nation-state. Operating in a typical traditional society, the newly-created Libyan state was navigating an environment where “kinship obligations to individual rulers supersede moral obligations to the state.”<sup>77</sup> Consequently, the Libyan monarch ruled the country through a “palace system of power;” whereby “political authority was exercised through local notables and tribal leaders who served as the link between the head of the system and tribal clans.” In the absence of a strong national identity, this precarious federal-like system was soon to be challenged following oil discoveries in the country.

Libya’s large oil revenues in the 1960s introduced two contradictory layers of complexity to the tribe-state relationship. First, the lack of a formal distributive mechanism for the newly-created wealth contributed to increased corruption in the

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<sup>76</sup> Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>77</sup> Mansour El-Kikhia, *Libya’s Qaddafi: The Politics of Contradiction* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1997), 26.

country and the creation of a crony class composed mainly of tribal leaders and notables. This new development threatened the egalitarian nature of the tribal social setting in Libya. As a consequence, the nascent monarchy was facing the dilemma of developing a state-based mechanism ensuring a more equitable distribution of oil revenues while, at the same time, preserving the prevalent position of the tribe in the political configuration in the country.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the substantial oil revenues dramatically helped improve the economic condition of the Libyan population as reflected by the exponential increase in per capita income which grew from \$35 to over \$1,000 between 1951 and 1967.<sup>79</sup> “Growing oil revenues, accompanied by improving economic conditions and greater social mobility,” Bruce St John argues, “also increased demands, especially among young Libyans, for a coherent ideology that would satisfy new, albeit vaguely understood, political and spiritual yearnings.”<sup>80</sup> Faced with these rising demands, neither the state nor the tribal structure was equipped with the ideological wherewithal to fill the void perceived by large segments of the Libyan society. These developments precipitated the demise of the Libyan monarchy and contributed to the emergence of a new political regime that understood that the key to its survival resided in finding a solution to the dilemma that the monarchy failed to resolve.

On September 1, 1969, Mu’ammarr al-Qaddafi, a young captain in the Libyan army, led a group of twelve military officers in a bloodless coup to depose the monarchy and assume power in the country. Cognizant of the difficulties faced by the previous political regime, Qaddafi was able to establish an authoritarian structure by exploiting the

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<sup>78</sup> Lisa Anderson, “Tribe and State: Libyan Anomalies,” in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 296.

<sup>79</sup> Bruce St John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), 123.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

ideological void and weak sense of national identity as well as the conflicting relationship between tribe and state. During the first few years of his tenure, Qaddafi experimented with Nasser's pan-Arabism only to abandon it after realizing that Nasserism has lost its appeal throughout MENA. Instead, Qaddafi formulated his own ideology, *al-nadhariya al-'alamiya al-thalita* (Third Universal Theory), which he presented in 1977 in his manifesto *al-kitab al-akhdar* (Green Book). According to this theory, Libya was to become a *jamahiriya*; a sort of direct democracy where the masses effectively rule. In practice, however, the Libyan regime instituted two layers of government: "a formal layer of 'peoples' institutions, and informal layer controlled by Qaddafi and Co."<sup>81</sup> This 'rule of the masses' façade, nonetheless, did not mask the realities of political repression and economic corruption that characterized Qaddafi's regime.

Politically, Qaddafi used the formal layers of government, which were composed of a system of popular committees and popular congresses accessible to the majority of Libyans, not only as a tool to suppress parties and labor unions, but also as a mechanism to control and calibrate any form of dissent within the country. Moreover, like other regimes in MENA, he maintained a security apparatus composed of many agencies under the leadership of his relatives, tribal allies, and former military colleagues. These security agencies built a reputation of brutality and did not hesitate to kidnap, imprison, torture, and assassinate anyone suspected of dissent. A good example of this brutality occurred in 1996, in the Abu Salim prison, where hundreds of prisoners from the Islamist opposition were assassinated in cold blood. In addition, fearing a military coup similar to the one he orchestrated to overthrow the monarchy, Qaddafi kept the Libyan military forces weak

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<sup>81</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 71.

and fragmented and relied, instead, on a paramilitary force composed of members of loyal tribes as well as mercenaries from neighboring African countries.

Economically, although Qaddafi used the massive oil and natural gas revenues to transform an underdeveloped Libyan society into one with the highest Human Development Index in Africa, the country also had high levels of corruption. Oil and natural gas revenues were used by key members of the regime for self-enrichment as well as a source to cultivate selective patronage among several tribal leaders and allies. This situation contributed to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the country and the rise of the unemployment rate which reached 20 percent on the eve of the 2011 uprising. In the face of these economic conditions, a growing discontent manifested itself among different segments of the Libyan society; especially after the release of the WikiLeaks cables that documented the lavish lifestyle of several members of the regime, including the Qaddafi family.

### The Libyan Uprising

By mid-January 2011 and cognizant of the events in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan regime lowered the prices of basic foodstuffs in order to forestall any form of domestic unrest. These efforts, however, proved too little too late. A few days later, protesters started gathering across the country, particularly in the eastern region, demanding the amelioration of their economic conditions. As was the case in Tunisia and Egypt, Qaddafi utilized a carrot-and-stick approach to respond to the demonstrations. While freeing several political prisoners and announcing the allocation of enormous resources for public projects, such as free housing, the regime also arrested many protestors and attempted to block the use of the internet and social networking. The

demonstrations reached their pinnacle on February 17, 2011, in Benghazi where a major riot broke out after the arrest of the lawyer of the families of the victims of the Abu Salim prison massacre.

The regime's response to the events in Benghazi was very brutal and caused the death of more than a hundred people in just the first two days of the riots. As a result of the harsh response of the regime to peaceful demonstrations, protests spread across the country and violence escalated on both sides; with the opposition responding both militarily and politically. Taking advantage of the regime's minimal presence in the eastern part of the country and benefiting from several defections from the army, the opposition controlled and established local councils in several eastern cities during the first few weeks of the uprising. Despite these gains by the opposition, Qaddafi kept his security apparatus and power base intact. As a consequence, by mid-March 2011, the conflict developed into a civil war which, in turn, settled into a stalemate with both parties unwilling to compromise.

Politically, the opposition was able, within a few days of the start of the uprising, to form the National Transitional Council (NTC) as an umbrella organization representing different opposition groups. The NTC succeeded in gaining recognition from many countries as the legitimate representative of Libya. The diplomatic efforts of the NTC culminated in the U.N. Security Council's imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya. The turning point in the Libyan conflict, however, occurred on March 17, 2011, when the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1973, authorizing member states to use all necessary measures to protect civilians in Libya. This resolution, which was construed by NATO members as an international mandate for a military intervention in

Libya, led to an extensive campaign of air strikes on pro-Qaddafi targets. This new development tipped the scale in favor of the opposition forces and enabled them to start their last offensive to control the remaining strongholds of Qaddafi's loyalists. Finally, by the end of August 2011, the opposition had complete control of Tripoli. Qaddafi, on the other hand, was captured and killed on October 20, 2011.

### The Syrian Political Regime: Origin, Development, and Nature

Although the current Syrian regime has its origin in the intra-party conflicts that plagued the ruling Ba'ath in the aftermath of establishing the third republic in 1963, authoritarianism in Syria was the by-product of the unstable political environment that characterized the country during the years following its independence from France in 1946. Syria entered the post-colonial period as a parliamentary republic where "the political elite, as well as the Syrian people in general, thought that it would be possible to build a modern nation based on the separation of the legislative, judicial, and executive authorities within the cabinet and to spell out the relationship of the army and intelligence agencies to these authorities."<sup>82</sup> These aspirations, however, were soon to be marred by a series of military coups starting in 1949. The first of these coups, which was supported by the United States and was the first military coup in modern MENA, brought down the government of the democratically elected president Shukri al-Quwatli.<sup>83</sup> This coup was immediately followed by two more coups in a one-year span; cementing, thus, the military's control over the nascent political institutions in the country. In 1954, following the riots that ended the presidency of Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, the military decided to

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<sup>82</sup> Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 1.

<sup>83</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2009), 21.

restore power to a civilian government. Although this transfer of power was accompanied by the full restoration of parliamentarianism, Syrian politics witnessed a great deal of polarization and conflicts among different political factions.<sup>84</sup> As a result, the days of the first republic in Syria came to an end in 1958.

The unstable and fragmented political environment that characterized the first republic created a sense of insecurity among several members of the Syrian elite as well as the general population over the lack of a clear vision for the future of the country. Following Nasser's rise to power in Egypt, many Syrians became, as did many around MENA, enamored with pan-Arabism and Nasser's vision for the future of Egypt and the region. The appeal of Nasserism culminated in the formation, in 1958, of the United Arab Republic (UAR); a union between Syria and Egypt that became known in the country as the period of the second republic. The experiment of the union with Egypt, however, did not go as well as many Syrians and their political elite might have expected. During the first months of the union, Nasser did not hide his intentions to design the newly-formed republic after the same style and structure of government he implemented in Egypt. In addition to demanding that all parties in Syria be disbanded, including the powerful Ba'ath, Nasser also imposed the Egyptian style of bureaucracy on the Syrian state apparatus which he "dismissed as 'scarcely worthy of a grocery shop'."<sup>85</sup> Given the Egyptian domination over the UAR, calls started mounting all over Syria to end the union and restore pluralism and the rule of law. In 1961, the short-lived union with Egypt was dissolved and Syria was able to escape Egyptian hegemony; albeit to fall back into the tumultuous and unstable political environment that characterized the pre-second republic

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<sup>84</sup> Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 74.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 86-87.

period. On March 8, 1963, a group of Ba'athist officers assumed power in the country; marking the beginning of the third republic.

After a period of intra-party conflicts, Hafiz al-Assad emerged, in 1970, as the undisputed leader of a robust authoritarian political structure that would endure even after his death. During his tenure, Assad was able to “transform the Syrian political order from a coup-ridden, postcolonial semi-state into a veritable model of authoritarian stability.”<sup>86</sup> This authoritarian model was composed of several key elements. First, there was the pyramidal form of the power structure “with the head of the state standing on top of the pyramid and its three sides all leading up to him –these were the government administration, the army and security organs (the intelligence), and the party.”<sup>87</sup> As for the government administration, in addition to a highly centralized bureaucratic system, Assad relied on his handpicked governors to run the day-to-day affairs in the fourteen Syrian governorates. These governors’ main task was to “execute the president’s commands –administering and supervising the departments attached to the central government ministries and overseeing the public sector in and around the governorate.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Assad established a coercive security apparatus under the supervision of the National Security Bureau. This security apparatus, which was very effective in the use of violence to suppress any perceived threat to the regime, was composed of several agencies; most of which have central as well as regional branches. In terms of importance and reputation, four of these agencies stand out: “[the] General Intelligence Administration (state security) officially subordinated to the Ministry of Interior; political

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<sup>86</sup> Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial by Fire* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2005), 23.

<sup>87</sup> Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

security, which is another Ministry of Interior department; military intelligence; and branches of the air force that are nominally subordinated to the Ministry of Defence.”<sup>89</sup>

The third side of Assad’s power pyramid consisted of the Ba’ath party. In addition to using the party’s ideology and structure as devices to generate popular support and to extend his control over the state apparatus, Assad utilized the Ba’ath to create what Flynt Leverett called “army-party symbiosis;” allowing him to “ensure the support of the armed forces for Syria’s post-1963 Ba’athist political order.”<sup>90</sup>

Another element of Assad’s authoritarian model was the cultivation of a broad social base composed of some segments of Syria’s minority communities as well as rural Sunnis who did not identify with the traditional Sunni establishment in the country. As Leverett noticed, this element, which was instrumental both to the endurance of the Assad regime and its stability, relied on two pillars. One was the secularization of political life which was appealing to Syria’s religious minorities; while the other was a populist agenda based on the commitment to some variant of socialism and land reform to mobilize support among the peasantry and other previously marginalized elements of the Syrian society.<sup>91</sup> In addition, during the last decade of his rule, Assad was able to expand the social base of his regime by coopting elements of the Sunni merchants mainly through the privatization of state assets.

Finally, and in order to bestow an aura of legitimacy on his regime and to portray the appearance of the rule of law, Assad codified his political structure in a constitution drafted in 1973. This constitution concentrated all the powers in the hands of the president. In addition to having the final say over major domestic policies and all foreign

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<sup>89</sup> Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, 23.

<sup>90</sup> Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, 24.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 24-25.

policy, Assad was the supreme commander of the armed forces. He also had the authority to appoint and to acquit civilian and military officers, including the prime minister; declare state of war and a state of emergency; and to dissolve the People's Assembly whenever he deemed fit.<sup>92</sup> It is worth noting that, in a paradox that marred many authoritarian regimes, Syria, up until few weeks after the start of the 2011 uprising, was operating under both the 1973 constitution as well as the emergency law that was in effect since 1963.

Given the robustness of this authoritarian political structure, political life in Syria was a one man show *par-excellence*. Throughout much of his reign, Hafiz al-Assad ruled the country without the slightest challenge to his leadership except for two incidents. The first was a challenge mounted by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to topple the Ba'athist regime. This challenge, which began during the second half of the 1970s, culminated in a final showdown between the group and the Syrian military in the city of Hama in 1982. The confrontation resulted in the infamous Hama Massacre where the regime forces crushed the Brotherhood and left between 5,000 and 25,000 dead, most of whom were inhabitants of the city itself.<sup>93</sup> The Hama Massacre was a strong reminder to potential challengers of the extent to which Assad was willing to go to preserve his regime. In addition to the Hama incident, Assad faced the second, and last, challenge to his rule in 1984. This time, however, it was Assad's younger brother, Rifa'at, who took advantage of his brother's serious health issues to lay claims to succession. Assad, nonetheless, successfully dealt with his brother's challenge and regained his supremacy over the political regime in Syria.

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<sup>92</sup> Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 111.

This last incident was also a turning point in the history of the Syrian political regime. After dealing with Rifa'at's challenge, which created the opportunity for a schism within the ranks of the regime, Assad turned his attention to the problem of succession. Thus, by the early 1990s, he started grooming his eldest son, Basil, for his eventual succession. His plans, nevertheless, were altered after the death of Basil in a car accident near Damascus International Airport in January 1994. Consequently, Bashar al-Assad, who was finishing his postgraduate studies in ophthalmology, at Western Eye Hospital in London, returned to Syria to assume the unofficial position of president-in-waiting. On June 11, 2000, one day after the death of his father, the Ba'ath Party unanimously nominated Bashar for the post of president of the republic. This nomination was quickly ratified after the Syrian People's Assembly amended Article 83 of the constitution in order to lower the presidential minimum age from 40 to 34, the age of Bashar.

The tenure of the young Assad was not much different from his father's. Politically, after a brief period of openness that encouraged a series of intellectual forums organized by activists and opposition members across the country, Bashar resorted back to the repressive tactics of the old regime. Although it is difficult to assess whether Bashar's willingness to create a political opening for civil society in Syria during the first few months of his rule was a genuine decision aborted by the old guard of the regime or just a tactic aimed at acquiring the political capital necessary for a smooth transition, what is certain, however, is that, for the new ruler in Damascus, economic reform took precedence over political openness. Thus, except for few modifications intended to put his own imprint on the Syrian regime, the authoritarian political structure and the robust

coercive apparatus Bashar inherited from his father remained intact. Chief among these modifications was Bashar's decision, in 2005, to sack his vice-president and his father's confidant, Abdul Halim Khaddam, and to appoint a new cabinet composed of his hand-picked officials.

Economically, Bashar implemented new policies in order to modernize the Syrian economy. Some of these policies, such as the establishment of a relatively strong banking system which the country lacked under the old regime, had promising results. Other policies, such as the privatization of state assets, contributed to the growth of corruption, especially among members with direct ties to the regime, including some of Bashar's relatives. In addition, because these economic policies hindered the ability of the state to control the economy and to provide essential services, Bashar's regime resorted to the creation of government-organized NGO's (GONGOs) as a new social control mechanism offering "both material (employment) and moral (doing good) benefits" to a wide segment of the Syrian society.<sup>94</sup>

### The Syrian Uprising

During the popular uprisings that swept MENA countries in 2010, many analysts and commentators believed that Syria was immune to political unrest. According to them, for example, Syria, as opposed to its neighboring countries, did not witness the same growing tensions between the populations and their ruling regimes in the decade preceding the Arab Spring. These analysts, however, seemed to downplay the presence and the impact of the same socioeconomic factors that were prevalent in other MENA countries in the eve of the uprisings. The beginning of the Syrian uprising looked more

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<sup>94</sup> Salam Kawakibi, "The Paradox of Government-Organized Civil Activism in Syria," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran*, ed. Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 173.

like the Libyan uprising than those in Egypt and Tunisia. The first protests against the regime were spontaneous and took place in the provinces away from the capital Damascus. The uprising effectively started on March 15, 2011, in Dera'a; a city on the Jordanian border some 60 miles south of Damascus. On that day, protests broke out demanding the release of a few school children who were arrested and tortured for writing 'Down with the Regime' on the walls of their school. The immediate response of the regime was to fire at the crowd and to cut basic services to the city of Dera'a. After the regime's brutal crackdown, demonstrations spread over other parts of the country.

Similar to other MENA regimes during the uprisings, the Syrian regime also resorted to the carrot-and-stick approach in dealing with the unrest. In order to placate the protestors, Bashar suspended the infamous emergency law. The regime also offered a few concessions to several constituencies; such as the Kurds to whom he granted citizenship as well as moderate Islamists who were allowed to form political parties.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, the regime did not hesitate to deploy the army to surround rebellious cities with tanks and to use paramilitary groups to fire live ammunition at unarmed demonstrators. These brutal measures only served to embolden the protestors who had no choice but to bear arms to protect themselves and their families. As a result, what started as peaceful demonstrations quickly morphed into a violent civil war.

The first major turning point in the Syrian uprising was the summer of 2011; over the course of which the opposition to the Syrian regime sought to unify politically and militarily. On the political and diplomatic fronts, a series of meetings to organize and coordinate the efforts of different opposition groups took place in Turkey and Qatar. These efforts culminated in the creation, on October 2, 2011, of the Syrian National

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<sup>95</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, 105.

Council (SNC) as a political umbrella composed of different exiled and domestic opposition groups. The SNC included groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Democratic People's Party, and the newly-formed Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The SNC achieved a few diplomatic accomplishments within the first few months of its creation. By the end of 2011, for example, it was able to get recognition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people from several countries, especially members of the League of Arab States who suspended Syria's membership and invited the SNC to their subsequent meetings. These achievements, however, could neither compensate for the internal cleavages within the SNC, nor could it mask the reality that the council was far from representing most major social and political constituencies in Syria.

In order to surmount these weaknesses, several opposition groups, including many within the SNC, agreed to form a more inclusive opposition front in a meeting in Qatar in November 2012. The resulting coalition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF), included, in addition to the SNC and LCC, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as members of the local revolutionary councils. Similar to its predecessor, the NCSROF did achieve some major diplomatic breakthroughs within the first few weeks of its creation. Chief among these was the international recognition it received as the 'legitimate representative' of the Syrian people from 100 countries, including the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, in December 2012 at the Friends of the Syrian People Conference in Morocco.

Despite this success, the NCSROF could not overcome some of the same weaknesses and criticism faced by the SNC. First, although it succeeded in broadening the political representation of the Syrian opposition, the newly-formed coalition failed to

reach out to other major components of the opposition, especially the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC). Unlike the NCSROF, the NCC, which is a political umbrella consisting of the most important domestic opposition groups headed by the longtime human rights activist Haythem al-Mana'a, advocates dialogue with the Syrian regime and a peaceful transition to democracy in the country.

In addition, the NCSROF could not escape the same internal cleavages that plagued the SNC. There were major differences within the coalition between those who favored more international intervention in the Syrian conflict and others who believed that increased foreign involvement reflected a power struggle among several regional and international actors with opposing strategic interests in Syria and in the region; and would eventually lead to the hijacking of the Syrian uprising. These internal conflicts manifested themselves in the resignations of many prominent members of the coalition; especially its first president, Mo'az al-Khatib, who declared his readiness, in March 2013, to hold conditional talks with Syrian Vice-President Farooq al-Shar'a. Finally, the NCSROF has been unable to fully coordinate with the different Syrian rebel groups and has failed to bring under its control both those groups perceived to be moderate, like the FSA, as well as others linked to al-Qaeda and advocating a Saudi-Wahhabi ideology such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

By the end of July 2011, a group of military defectors and civilian rebels formed the FSA under the command of Colonel Riad al-Ass'ad who was later replaced by Salim Idriss. By the end of the summer, the FSA, which claimed to have between 10,000 and 15,000 fighters, became the *de-facto* armed resistance of the opposition. It engaged in

guerilla warfare against the Syrian security forces as well the Syrian military; and claimed responsibility for many operations including the bombing attack on the Syrian intelligence headquarters that killed, among others, Assad's brother-in-law and influential chief intelligence officer, Assif Shawkat, along with Dawood Rajiha and Hassan Turkmani, respectively Defense Minister and former Defense Minister. Over the following months, as the Syrian military operations became intense, the FSA countered with the same, if not higher, level of violence; and was accused of human rights violations including targeting civilians and summary executions of Syrian army captives.

By the beginning of 2012, it was clear that the Syrian conflict had reached new and unprecedented levels of violence. This situation was further exacerbated by two major factors. First, there was the radicalization of the rebel forces; especially after the influx of foreign fighters espousing a Saudi- and al-Qaeda- Wahhabi ideology. These fighters comprised the armed groups that were relatively more effective in fighting the Syrian military forces but were also more notorious in engaging in sectarian violence and in orchestrating a series of indiscriminate collective massacres, especially in the areas of the country that came under their control.

Second, there was the transformation of the Syrian conflict to a proxy, or a quasi-proxy, war between several international and regional actors who either backed the Syrian regime or supported the rebel groups. On one hand, Russia, Iran, and, to a lesser extent, China stood by the Syrian regime by providing diplomatic support as well as military equipment and advice. On the other hand, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and the majority of Arab countries, notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia, provided financial support and military training and equipment to the regime's opposition

and the different rebel groups. Unfortunately, the financial and the military investments that the regional and international actors made in the Syrian conflict as well as the opposing strategic goals that these actors had *vis-à-vis* Syria and the region were not accompanied by the same level of diplomatic involvement to find a peaceful settlement to the plight of the Syrian population.

Two years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the violent conflict seemed to have reached a stalemate with no end in sight, leaving, according to UN estimates more than 120,000 Syrians dead and several millions either internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries. By April 2013, however, the Syrian military mounted a counteroffensive that laid the ground for several successful campaigns to recapture major areas and strongholds of the rebel groups. These successes were possible mainly due to Hezbollah's intervention alongside the Syrian army in what the Lebanese group characterized as 'preemptive' strikes against Wahhabi and al-Qaeda affiliated groups and the potential danger they pose to peaceful co-existence among different religious sects in Lebanon. Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict during its first two years did not go beyond providing logistical and military advice to the Syrian army and protecting Shia religious sites as well as bordering Syrian villages with a predominantly Lebanese population. After some rebel groups threatened to bring the fight to Hezbollah's backyard, the Lebanese group decided to put its military might behind the Syrian army.

Thus, in June 2013, and after only a few weeks of fighting, Hezbollah and the Syrian army drove all the rebel groups out of the strategic city of Qussayr which connected the northern and southern parts of the country. Following the fall of Qussayr, the Syrian army and Hezbollah continued their offensive to recapture major parts of

Homs, Aleppo, and most of the countryside of Damascus. The latest military campaign by the Syrian army and its Lebanese ally, which started in January 2014 and which targeted the rebels and foreign fighters in the Qalamoun mountains on the borders between Syria and Lebanon, would leave only two major areas outside of the regime's control: the province of Dera'a where the uprising began and the eastern desert area bordering Iraq. In addition to these military successes, the regime has been able to broker peaceful agreements with several rebel groups through reconciliation initiatives. Despite these achievements, which seem to strengthen the hands of the Syrian regime in any future negotiations with the opposition, it would probably, and unfortunately, take many more Syrian casualties before a political solution to the conflict, acceptable both to the two direct parties to the conflict as well as their respective regional and international backers, is finally reached.

## CHAPTER V

### **Conclusions: Why Was the Syrian Uprising Unique?**

This historical account and reconstruction of events, which portrays how the similarities between the four countries and their historical development shaped the beginnings of the uprisings, their outcomes, and the regimes' response to them, helps shed light on the factors explaining why the Syrian uprising did not result in the same outcome as the ones in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Before enumerating these different factors, however, a few points need be made about the utility of this historical account to providing an answer to the question at hand. First, a great deal of ink has been spilled over the inadequacy of the dominant frameworks of comparative politics to fit MENA politics. Instead, the bulk of the scholarship dealing with different aspects of MENA politics, particularly the lack of democratic transition and the durability of authoritarianism in the region, relied mainly on prerequisite and cultural approaches to explain these phenomena. These approaches, however, failed miserably to ascertain the major factors underlying the phenomena they purport to explain; and prevented, therefore, the field of MENA politics from taking advantage of the several theoretical frameworks of comparative politics to explain the different phenomena that either contributed to or resulted from the political structures and processes in the region.

In order to clarify this point, one only needs consider how both the prerequisite and the cultural approaches dealt with the lack of democratic transition in MENA countries. The former approach, which attributed this lack to the absence in the region of several economic, social, and political prerequisites of democracy, failed to explain why democratic transitions occurred in other regions of the world, like Sub-Saharan countries,

where these prerequisites were lacking more than in MENA countries.<sup>96</sup> The latter approach, which emphasizes cultural factors when explaining the endurance of authoritarianism in MENA, surprisingly ignores that “other world cultures, notably Catholicism and Confucianism, [which] have at different times been accused of incompatibility with democracy; yet these cultural endowments have not prevented countries in Latin America, Southern Europe, or East Asia from democratizing.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, a historical account that traces the development of the political regimes was necessary in order to, among other things, track the common and different features that might have influenced the course of events before and during the uprisings and also to restore a level of academic sanity to the study of MENA politics; especially from a comparative perspective.

Second, the historical account in the previous chapter is also necessary to draw a fairly accurate picture of the political structures in the four countries. This is especially true when one considers the irresistible, and at times unwarranted, temptation to depict the political regimes in MENA countries as mere reflections of the personal traits of their rulers. Although individual authoritarian leaders in MENA countries, as well as elsewhere, have put their personal imprints on their respective regimes, reducing these regimes to the individual characteristics of their leaders transforms comparative politics to a Freudian endeavor that emphasizes the rulers’ psychology to explain how the regime operates. Consequently, these depictions end up, often times, neglecting the political structure underlying these political regimes. A historical account, such as the one in the previous chapter, not only identifies the political structures of the four authoritarian

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<sup>96</sup> Bellin, “Coercive Institutions,” 24.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 24.

regimes, but also ascertains the development as well as the subtle equilibrium between the major components of these political structures.

The third point about the utility of the historical account is closely related to the second. It deals with the political processes that accompany and characterize the operations of the political structures in the four countries. Here again, a historical account helps shed light on how political processes, which are usually dismissed as insignificant within an authoritarian context, might have had some unintended consequences such as creating favorable conditions for the flourishing of anti-authoritarian institutions. In order to illustrate this point, one can consider, for example, the electoral process in Egypt which was considered, and rightfully so, nothing more than an Orwellian manipulation of democratic institutions throughout Mubarak's reign. No matter how farcical this process was, however, it provided an opening for the Egyptian opposition to, at least, organize its ranks and to be better prepared for an eventual showdown with the regime. On the contrary, in Syria, where the electoral process was a referendum on Ba'athist and few other allied parties' candidates, the opposition historically lacked any type of political space that would allow it to assert itself as a viable alternative to the regime.

The historical account elaborated in the previous chapter helps ascertain, at least, five factors that contributed both to the regime's resiliency in Syria and, at the same time, to the uprisings' success in the other three countries. Three of these factors concern the structure and political processes in Syria; the other two factors deal respectively with the Syrian opposition and the international response to the Syrian uprising.

The first factor deals with the problem of succession that the authoritarian rulers of the four countries had to deal with, or more precisely, how the Syrian regime was not

exposed to such a problem. The first observation one makes by surveying the popular uprisings in the four countries is that the political regimes that were toppled were led by octogenarian and septuagenarian presidents who were in the process of grooming their sons, or some other family member, for their eventual succession. In presidential security states like the ones in the four countries, the process of succession, “although designed to produce a sense of security and predictability for important sections of the elite, proved quite capable, if mishandled or if simply allowed to go on too long, of promoting exactly the opposite: an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty exacerbated by increasing popular hostility to the ruling family itself.”<sup>98</sup>

In the eve of the uprisings, the process of succession was still in the making and far from being complete in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia. In the first two countries, it was no hidden secret that Qaddafi and Mubarak were both seriously considering their sons, Seif-al-Islam and Gamal respectively, for their eventual succession. In Tunisia, on the other hand, Ben-Ali was grooming his son-in-law, Sakhr el-Materi, for the post of president. This process created a schism within the regimes’ power structure in the three countries and alienated influential groups within these regimes; in particular those who had seen in it “a threat either to republican legitimacy or their own particular interest.”<sup>99</sup> As a result, these regimes became more vulnerable or, at least, less powerful because they lost the unity and cohesion necessary both for the stability of their rule and, more importantly, for the effective response to any perceived, or actual, domestic threat to that stability.

The problem of succession was well illustrated in Egypt. By the end of the 1990s, Mubarak started the process of grooming his younger son, Gamal, for an eventual

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<sup>98</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

succession. Subsequently, Gamal was appointed to important positions in the government and in the ruling NDP. Gamal also became his father's main adviser and representative in international forums. This development did not sit very well with many components of Egypt's power structure. Chief among these was the military institution which saw in Mubarak's plan a threat to their dominance of Egyptian politics considering, among other things, that Gamal would be the first civilian president of Egypt since the establishment of the republic in 1952.<sup>100</sup> In addition, Gamal's potential succession of his father was perceived by the Egyptian opposition as the conservation of the *status quo* and the continuation of a regime that they held responsible for the growing political repression and economic corruption. Therefore, when the uprising started in Cairo, the Mubarak regime lost some of the cohesion of its internal structure and was domestically more vulnerable than it ever was.

Unlike the other three countries, the problem of succession did not present itself by the time the uprising broke out in Syria. The process was tackled and solved well before Bashar came to the picture as his father's eventual successor. The regime was confronted with the problem of succession first in 1984, when then-President Hafiz al-Assad was hospitalized for major health issues. During his convalescence, Hafez's younger brother, Rifa'at, took advantage of his control over an important military unit to support his claims for succession.<sup>101</sup> Rifa'at, however, was not in good standing with the regime's establishment, especially those aspiring for succession themselves who saw him as a symbol of corruption and a threat to the regime's stability. Rifa'at's actions almost culminated in a military confrontation with his opponents.

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<sup>100</sup> Muhammad Abdul Aziz and Youssef Hussein, "The President, the Son, and the Military: The Question of Succession in Egypt," *The Arab Studies Journal* 9, no. 10 (2002): 86.

<sup>101</sup> Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 82.

After his release from hospital, Assad used both caution and political shrewdness to deal with this event and subsequently the problem of succession. He appointed three vice-presidents, his own brother and two other candidates for succession, Abdul Halim Khaddam and Zuhayr Mashariqah, to counter the balance of the three.<sup>102</sup> Few months later, Assad sent his brother into exile, apparently, to send a message to the other two and anyone else aspiring for succession. This double move, as it were, bought Assad enough time to devise and implement his own plan for succession. By the early 1990s, it was no hidden secret in Syria that Assad was grooming his eldest son, Basil, to become his successor. Although Assad's plans were marred by Basil's death, he did not meet any opposition in order to ensure the succession for his other son, Bashar. Thus, by the time the popular uprising began in Syria, the forty-five year old Bashar was at the helm of an internally solid power structure that was, unlike the other three countries, immune to the problem of succession.

The second factor deals with the role of the military during the Syrian uprising and how it was different from the role the armies played in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. One needs only remember that the Tunisian army refused to carry presidential orders to fire at the crowds and how the Egyptian military patiently waited to see how the events in the country were unfolding before declaring itself the 'protector of the revolution'. The neutrality of the military forces in these three countries was due to several factors. In Libya and Tunisia, the military was not an important component of the security apparatus or, at least, not as important as the other components. In the former country, Qaddafi mistrusted his army and left it, often, without adequate equipment. He, instead, relied on paramilitary units composed of his tribal allies as well as mercenaries from neighboring

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<sup>102</sup> Alasdair Drysdale, "The Succession Question in Syria," *Middle East Journal* 39, (1985): 249.

countries. In the latter country, Ben-Ali inherited a security apparatus where the military, until the beginning of the uprising, was kept away from domestic politics. In Egypt, however, the military institution, which dominated the country's politics since 1952, saw its influence waning during the last two decades of Mubarak's tenure. Several reasons contributed to this development. First, the Egyptian military's main source of legitimacy and public support was increasingly dissipating; especially after signing the Camp David Accords which decreased the possibilities to engage in a war with Israel.<sup>103</sup> Second, beginning in the 1980s, Egypt pursued neoliberal economic policies following the instructions of the IMF and the World Bank. These policies, which required minimal interference by state institutions in the market, resulted in the decrease of the military's economic power in the country.<sup>104</sup> In addition to the process of Mubarak's succession, these two factors were perceived by the Egyptian army as constituting a serious threat to its political future and the historic role it played in the country's politics. Combined together, these factors provide a good explanation for the Egyptian military's stance during the uprising.

Unlike these countries, the Syrian army was the main tool of repression against the popular revolt. During the course of the Syrian conflict, the army remained, overall, on the side of the Assad regime, except for few inconsequential defections among some soldiers and low-ranking military officers. This high level of loyalty can be traced back to the historical role the army played in Syria as well as to its entrenchment in the country's politics. When the elder Assad assumed power in 1970, he embarked upon a path to politicize the military by using the Ba'ath party as a tool. Through this process, top

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<sup>103</sup> Abdul Aziz and Hussein, "The President, the Son, and the Military," 77.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

military officials were appointed to important posts in both the party and the state apparatus in order to ensure the support of the army to the regime. Moreover, the Ba'athization of the armed forces gave the military a new political identity and, more importantly, an ideology; making its support for the regime, therefore, a matter of principle not just duty. Finally, similar to the other components of the Syrian power structure, many members of the military had an important economic stake in the survival of the regime and consider any attempt to overthrow it an existential threat to their political and economic privileges.

Finally, the Syrian military's loyalty to the regime was further cemented during the past two years of the conflict. After the influx of foreign fighters to the country, particularly those espousing al-Qaeda and Wahhabi ideologies, the Syrian army saw it as its patriotic duty to stay by the side of Assad who succeeded in portraying the uprising as a foreign conspiracy that threatens the Syrian social fabric and the longtime peaceful co-existence among its diverse social segments. Therefore, there should be no surprise that the Syrian army's reaction to the uprising was different from the militaries' reactions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

The third factor impacting the outcome of the Syrian uprising is demographic in nature. Unlike the other three countries, Syria has a very diverse society composed, in addition to the Sunni Arab majority, of several minorities, including Alawis, Kurds, various Christian sects, Druze, Ismailis, Shias, and Jews. In MENA countries, a comparable ethnic and religious mosaic can only be encountered in Iraq and Lebanon. Historically, the Syrian Ba'ath regime took advantage of this social factor by playing on the fears of both minorities as well as some components of the Sunni majority, especially

the business community. To the former, the regime presented itself as the sole protector from a potentially repressive Sunni rule; while to the latter, it portrayed itself as a shield against sectarian violence and as the guarantor of domestic stability.

In the beginning of the uprising, the Syrian regime played the sectarian card to quell the enthusiasm of the minorities and other components of the Syrian society to join the protests. From the outset, the regime painted the protesters as a group of Sunni extremists determined to establish a rule with no toleration for the ethnic and religious diversity of the Syrian society. When Bouthaina Sha'aban, a senior advisor to Assad, for example, was asked to comment on the protesters, she replied: "we think these people are a combination of fundamentalists, extremists, smugglers, people who are ex-convicts and are being used to make trouble."<sup>105</sup> This tactic helped the regime mobilize, or at least neutralize, considerable segments of the Syrian society which, although not particularly fond of the Assad regime, were "more afraid of what might happen if Assad fell and a conservative, Sunni-dominated regime came to power seeking retribution."<sup>106</sup>

The success of the regime in employing the sectarian card was due in part to the Syrian opposition's activities or lack thereof, before and throughout the uprising. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, Syria lacked civil and political associations that were prepared for an event of a magnitude of the popular uprising. Such associations, as was the case in Egypt, were critical in maintaining the opposition's discipline and preempting the regime's exploitation of ideological, ethnic, or religious cleavages within the society. In addition the Syrian opposition groups were only formalistically inclusive in their attempts to organize throughout the conflict. Consequently, they failed to assuage the fears of

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<sup>105</sup> Lesh, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 110.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

different components of the Syrian society, especially ethnic and religious minorities. This reality was illustrated in the early phases of the uprising in the comments of an opposition member who, in criticizing the opposition's lack of diversity, stated: "[N]owadays they're looking for one Christian, two Alawites, three Druzes, and then they say they're representative."<sup>107</sup> Finally, the increased influence of Wahhabi elements, such the Nusra Front or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, among the armed rebel groups contributed to the spread of sectarian-motivated violence throughout the country. This development not only helped vindicate the claim of the regime that it is a buffer for various communities in the country, but also made its message of "if we go, you will be left to the wolves" resonate better with several components of the Syrian society.<sup>108</sup> As a result and as reported by *World Tribune*, by mid-2013, NATO was studying polling data that "asserted that 70 percent of Syrians support the Assad regime. Another 20 percent were deemed neutral and the remaining 10 percent expressed support for the rebels."<sup>109</sup>

The inability of the Syrian opposition to placate the fears of different minorities in the country introduces us to the fourth factor impacting the outcome of the uprising: the overall character, organization, and activities of the Syrian opposition before and during the conflict. Historically, the Syrian opposition lacked the political space, albeit narrow, enjoyed by both the Tunisian and Egyptian opposition groups. In the latter countries, several political processes, like regular parliamentary elections, helped many opposition groups to form valuable organizational networks and to position themselves as viable alternatives to the ruling political regimes in their respective countries. In Syria, on the

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<sup>107</sup> Lesh, *The fall of the House of Assad*, 107.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

<sup>109</sup> World Tribune, "NATO Data: Assad Winning the War for Syrians' Hearts and Minds," *World Tribune*, May 31, 2013, accessed June 1, 2013, <http://www.worldtribune.com/2013/05/31/nato-data-assad-winning-the-war-for-syrians-hearts-and-minds.html>.

other hand, the country operated under an emergency law that allowed the regime to curtail, if not to eliminate, all potential domestic opposition. The 1963 Emergency Law gave the government the power, among other things, to suspend habeas corpus and the right to due process as well as to establish special courts which could sentence anyone believed to constitute a threat to state security. Under these circumstances, it was very difficult for an independent civil society and an organized opposition to flourish. Throughout the tenure of the elder Assad and except for the opposition of few intellectuals, the only meaningful challenge to the regime's hegemony came from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1982 incidents in the city of Hama. Thus, it was no surprise that Syria lacked the kind of organized and sophisticated opposition groups that both Egypt and Tunisia had.

The effects of this situation manifested themselves clearly in the first few weeks of the Syrian uprising. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, where the opposition groups organized massive demonstrations in the major cities of their respective countries, the protests in Syria were generally sporadic and were concentrated in small towns and rural areas, rather than in major cities or in the capital itself. In addition, the Syrian protesters could not channel the popular discontent in order to mobilize the kind of massive civil disobedience and large sit-ins that were crucial in neutralizing the reaction of major components of the regimes' coercive apparatuses in both Tunisia and Egypt.

If the lack of a well organized opposition affected the outcome of the Syrian uprising in its first phase, the process of establishing a unified front representing different opposition groups was not particularly helpful once the uprising morphed to an all-out civil war. The opposition efforts during this stage were characterized by internal division,

political miscalculations, and military excesses that helped alienate significant components of the Syrian society. Politically, the National Initiative for Change (NIC), a Syrian exile opposition group, was the first group to attempt to create a schism between the regime and the military. In a statement issued on April 29, 2011, the NIC warned that the only option for Syria to avoid violence and chaos was for the military to lead a peaceful transition. The statement carelessly mentioned the names of Minister of Defense General Ali Habib and the Chief of Staff General Dawood Rajiha as individuals who “represent a background that Syrians can positively relate with that enables them to take a key pivotal role during the transition process.”<sup>110</sup> On August 8, 2011, General Habib was ‘found dead’ at his home, one day after his dismissal.<sup>111</sup>

This mishap by the NIC was the first in a series of debacles and political malpractice by the Syrian opposition. First, it took four months for the opposition groups, from their first gathering in the Turkish city of Antalya, to establish the Syrian National Council as a unified front to coordinate their activities and to intensify their diplomatic efforts. Despite being successful in gathering international diplomatic recognition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, the SNC failed to mobilize large support from within Syria. In addition, some major domestic opposition groups and coalitions had completely different political agendas than the SNC. Several of these groups, for example, did not rule out dialogue and political negotiations with the regime to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. These same groups had been consistently against foreign military intervention, and describe the SNC as the ‘Washington Club’, in

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<sup>110</sup> Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 99.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

reference to the association of many members of the council with both the Bush and Obama administrations.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, the SNC was hardly representative of the diverse outlook of the Syrian society and failed to effectively coordinate with the armed opposition. Although its charter claims that “[a]ll ethnic and religious groups that exist in Syrian society have equal rights in Syria’s future on the basis of citizenship without discrimination. Each group has rights and responsibilities on an equal footing with everyone else,” the SNC did not reach out to all major components of the Syrian society.<sup>113</sup> The council was also criticized by some of its own members for having a Muslim Brotherhood bias and for espousing an agenda that did not capture the political views of other groups within the council. In addition, the SNC failed to bring the different armed groups under its political umbrella. As a result, the activities of both the political and military wings of the Syrian opposition were increasingly at odds. This situation did not change dramatically with the establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. This new council, still dominated by members of the SNC, was also marred by internal division; the latest round of which was the resignation of many of its prominent members, including the president of the coalition, Mo’az al-Khatib who stepped down just few days after the coalition elected an interim prime minister for a ‘provisional government of Syria’.

Militarily, the Syrian opposition formed the Free Syrian Army in the summer of 2011. Although it was successful in controlling many parts of the country, the group,

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<sup>112</sup> Lesh, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 171.

<sup>113</sup> “Syrian National Council- National Consensus Charter,” Pharos Observatory, last modified July 3, 2012, accessed June 1, 2013, [http://www.pharosobservatory.com/c/asia/syria/110915 CNS charte.pdf/view](http://www.pharosobservatory.com/c/asia/syria/110915_CNS_charte.pdf/view).

however, also engaged in many instances of sectarian violence, summary executions of military detainees, as well as serious abuses against civilians, including kidnapping and torture. This situation was exacerbated when several Wahhabi groups joined the fight against the Syrian army. These groups were involved in many violent incidents which claimed hundreds of innocent civilian lives. One of these was a suicide bombing inside a mosque, on March 22, 2013, in Damascus, killing 41 people including the most prominent Sunni cleric in the country, the 84 year old Muhammad Said al-Boti. Other incidents included slaying many Alawis, vandalizing Christian, Shia, and other Islamic sites. These violations, to say the least, were enough to alienate significant portions of the Syrian society and to confirm the regime's narrative that without its presence, sectarian violence is inevitable in the country. Thus, unlike Egypt and Tunisia where the opposition groups displayed a high level of coordination and showed a great deal of discipline, the Syrian opposition lacked those basic ingredients that, although might not be sufficient, are necessary in order to make an impact on the outcome of the popular uprising.

The fifth and last factor that impacted the outcome of the Syrian uprising, particularly in its military phase, was the lack of an international military intervention. Among the other three countries, only Libya presents a situation comparable to Syria. In that country, NATO air strikes helped resolve the military deadlock between the opposition and Qaddafi's forces in favor of the former. An international military option, however, did not materialize in the case of Syria mainly because of several geopolitical, strategic, and logistical calculations. First, the Syrian military capabilities presented a respectable challenge for any international power considering the use of any type of

military intervention against the country. Unlike Libya where the military was marginalized throughout the tenure of Qaddafi, Syria was able to sustain a relatively sophisticated army and keep its level of preparedness high at all times due to the state of war between Syria and Israel. This level of preparedness and sophistication was partly the reason behind the cautious approach of many military officials in the West about using a military option a la Libya vis-à-vis the Syrian regime. When asked about the effectiveness of a military intervention against Syria, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, commented that: “Whether the military effect would produce the kind of outcome I think that not only members of Congress but all of us would desire –which is an end to the violence, some kind of political reconciliation among the parties and a stable Syria- that’s the reason I’ve been cautious about the application of the military instrument of power. It’s not clear to me that it would produce that outcome.”<sup>114</sup> Dempsey added that “the United States military has the capability to defeat” the sophisticated Syrian air defense system, “but it would be a greater challenge, take longer and require more resources. To have a no-fly zone you simply don’t penetrate it- you have to control it. So it means that at some level you’d have to degrade the integrated air defense system.”<sup>115</sup>

In addition, there was the geostrategic location of Syria and the fear of a repetition of another post-Saddam Iraq scenario where chaos, this time, would not be confined only to Syria; it would potentially spread to other vital regional allies of the West and the United States. Furthermore, it would invite other powerful regional players, such as Iran and Hezbollah, to join the fight along a strategic ally they are not very eager to see go.

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<sup>114</sup> Stephanie Gaskell, “Martin Dempsey Cautious on Syria,” *Politico*, April 30, 2013, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/martin-dempsey-cautious-on-syria-90792.html>.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

This scenario was exacerbated by two more elements. On one hand, there was the failure of the Syrian opposition groups to coordinate and produce a unified political program; while on the other, there was the increased presence of extreme elements among the opposition groups. These two elements were captured in former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's response about arming the opposition; "what are we going to arm them with and against what? We know al-Qaeda is supporting the opposition in Syria. Are we supporting al-Qaeda in Syria? Hamas is now supporting the opposition. Are we supporting Hamas in Syria? If you're a military planner or if you're secretary of state and you are trying to figure out do you have the elements of an opposition that is actually viable, that we don't see."<sup>116</sup>

Furthermore, an international military intervention in Syria was vehemently opposed by the country's strategic allies, especially China and Russia. The former sees in the potential fall of the Assad regime a loss of a major trading partner and a political ally in the region. China became, by 2010, Syria's third largest importer and "Beijing's renewed interest in Damascus indicates that China sees Syria as an important trading hub...China and Syria gave each other understanding and support on issues concerning each other's core and major interests...China showed consistent understanding and firm support for Syria's position on the Golan Heights while Syria remained committed to the one China position."<sup>117</sup>

Russia, on the other hand, had a historically strategic relationship with Syria. Economically, Russia is not willing to lose another important partner in MENA, after the fall of Qaddafi, considering the huge economic investments that Russia made in Syria

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<sup>116</sup> Lesh, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 200.

<sup>117</sup> Holly Yan, "Why China, Russia Won't Condemn Syrian Regime," in *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, David Lesh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 137.

over the years. Strategically, Syria is host to Russia's biggest and only military base outside the former Soviet Union. This base, which is located in the Syrian Mediterranean port of Tartus, serves also as a strategic fuelling spot for Russian warships operating in the region. Given these conditions, both Russia and China were not even willing to compromise on the wording of several UN Security Council resolutions with strong language against the Syrian regime. They both feared that those resolutions might serve, as was the case in Libya, as a cover for a military strike against Syria.

To summarize the findings of this study, the ability of the Syrian regime to withstand the popular uprising in the country and to avoid the fate of the political regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya stemmed from five factors. First, the Assad regime, as opposed to the regimes in the other three countries, was immune to the problem of succession and the consequences it engenders. Second, the cohesion of the components of the Syrian regime's security apparatus remained intact throughout the uprising as evidenced by the role of the Syrian army which, contrary to the military forces in the other three countries, remained loyal to the regime. Third, the Syrian society was far more diverse ethnically and religiously than the societies in the other three countries. This state of affairs allowed the regime to portray itself as a shield against sectarian violence and to play on the fears of the country's minorities who, for the most part, did not join the ranks of the opposition groups. Fourth, the Syrian opposition groups could neither overcome their political cleavages nor curb the influence of the Wahhabi and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups which dominated the military ranks of the opposition. Finally, contrary to Libya, an international military intervention against the Syrian regime did not materialize mainly due to the potential consequences of such an intervention as well as

the strong support the regime received from its powerful regional and international allies throughout the uprising.

To reiterate a point made in the introductory chapter, these five explanations are not intended to be final or complete. This low level of scrutiny was dictated by the recent occurrence of the popular uprisings in MENA and the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict. Thus, it is incumbent on future scholarship to assess these explanations and to determine which ones were necessary or sufficient conditions for the outcome of the Syrian uprising in particular and those of the other uprisings in general.

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