Plutocracy and Democracy in Syria between 2000-2018

By

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Dedication

To my mother, Farida al-Fawakhiri and father, Muhamad Salim Barakat who gave me a love for learning, and could not see this PhD completed.

And to one of my father's students, Martin Hosking, whom he befriended and inspired.

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the completion of my PhD thesis theoretically, empirically or emotionally. I cannot, unfortunately, mention all their names, but I am indebted to them.

I am highly thankful to my supervisors for their intellectual and emotional support and patience during the long journey of the PhD. I am honoured to benefit from Professor William Scott Lucas. It would have been impossible for me to complete this research without his invaluable advice and enlightenment. I am most indebted to him. I also wish to acknowledge and give special thanks to Dr Gerasimos Tsourapas for his extensive suggestions for improving the theoretical argument, and to Tricia Thomas in the Department of Political Science and International Studies for her patience and co-operation.

Undoubtedly, I am honoured to have Professor Rosemary Hollis, and Dr Simon Jackson to examine my work, and Professor Stefan Wolff to chair my dissertation committee. Their efforts, guidance and wealth of knowledge have contributed the most to complete this work.

My special thanks to my wife Alaa for her kind and generous support both emotionally and practically. She allowed me to work freely to complete this research. I am most grateful to Masa and Salim, my little angles who brought endless happiness to my life.

Abstract

This thesis introduces the concept of plutocracy as a distinct type of regime to explain the response of president Bashar al-Assad's regime to calls for greater democracy in Syria between 2000-2018. It traces the interaction between the two processes of democracy and plutocracy within the Syrian system. Using the case study, the thesis suggests that plutocracy emerged organically since the 1970s in response to internal and external context and interaction between Islam and democracy. The thesis suggests that plutocracy was not an abstract idea, but a defined political and economic system which interacted with internal and external conditions. It claims that plutocracy was applied by the regime since the 1970s to organise political power and demands for greater democracy. An elite group derived their power from their wealth and governed the society. The thesis defines plutocracy as an elite of the wealthy surrounding the president. They govern the society and control different sectors through a network of connections within the military, the Baath Party and the state institutions for the advancement of their economic interests and the interests of the regime in a two-way complementary relationship. Plutocracy has created a system and a business network that transcends geographical, ethnic and religious differences. It founded a stable and responsive system in the national interest of the state and survival of the nation.

Note on the Referencing

The thesis uses a Harvard referencing system that identifies the author, year of publication and page number in parenthesis in the text. Full references are contained in the bibliography. References are listed in the alphabetical order by the author's last name. If there are multiple sources by the same author, then references are listed in order by the date of publication. The bibliography included hard copy sources of books and journals, and electronic copy sources of e-books, e-journals, websites and online videos.

When referencing suras[1] and ayas[2] of the Quran,[3] two numbers separated by a colon format were used, as the traditional publication details such as author, year of publication, place of publication and page number are not applicable. When citing ayas, God or any pronouns referring to him were capitalised, as spelled in the Quran.

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[1] Arabic word meaning 'chapters'.
[2] Arabic word meaning 'verses'.
[3] The Quran is comprised of 114 suras. Suras are comprised of ayas, which are comprised of several rhymed words.

I. Appendix

Appendix A: Syrian regime chart 2000-2018
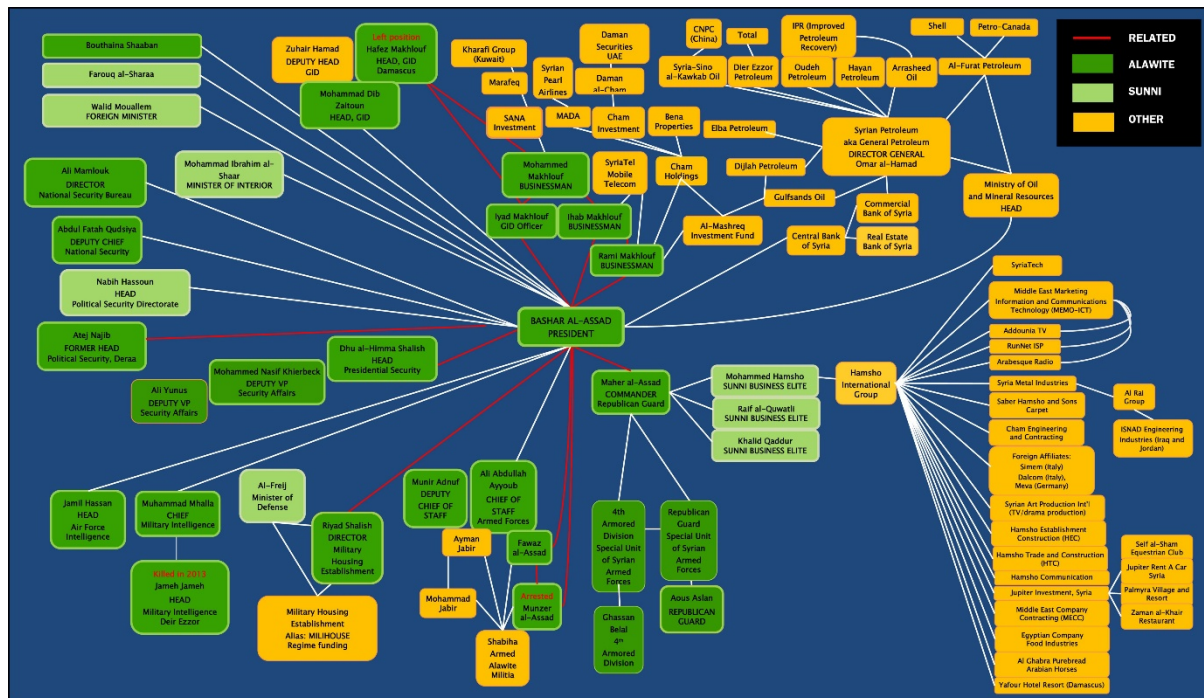
Available from: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/all-the-tyrants-men-chipping-away-at-the-assad-regimes-core [Accessed 09 August 2018].

Appendix B: List of abbreviations

ART: Arab Radio and Television.

ASMC: Alawite Sect Management Council.

AWU: Arab Writers' Union.

CMC: Crisis Management Cell.

CRCS: Committees for the Revival of Civil Society.

GCC: Gulf Co-operation Council.

GDP: Gross Domestic Product.

HRW: Human Rights Watch.

ILO: International Labour Organisation.

ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

KSA: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

LCC: Local Coordination Committees.

MB: Muslim Brethren.

MP: Member of the parliament.

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

NDG: National Democratic Gathering.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation.

NPF: National Progressive Front.

NSF: National Salvation Front.

RT: Russia Today.

SANA: Syrian Arab News Agency.

UAR: United Arab Republic.

UK: United Kingdom.

UN: United Nations.

UNSCR: United Nations Security Council Resolution.

US: United States of America.

USD: United States Dollar.

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

WMDs: Weapons of Mass Destruction.

1946: Independence of Syria.

1947: Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar founded the Arab Socialist Baath Party.

1949-1970: Civilian government disrupted by repeated coups.

1958-1961: Union between Syria and Egypt under the United Arab Republic.

1963: Baath army officers seize power.

1966: Salah Jadid leads a coup against the civilian Baath Command. Hafez al-Assad becomes the minister of defence.

1967: Israeli forces seize the Golan Heights.

1970: Hafez al-Assad overthrows President Nur al-Din al-Atasi.

1973: Riots break out after Hafez al-Assad dropping the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim.

1980: Muslim groups instigate uprisings and riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

1981: Israel formally annexes the Golan Heights.

1982: The MB uprising in the city of Hama.

1982: Israel invades Lebanon and attacks the Syrian army.

1984: Hafez al-Assad's brother Rifaat promoted to vice-president.

1991: Investment Law 10/1991 issued.

1994: Hafez al-Assad's son Basil, who was likely to succeed his father, killed in a car accident.

1998: Hafez al-Assad's brother Rifaat dismissed as vice-president.

2000 June, 10th: Hafez al-Assad dies from heart failure at age 69.

2000 June, 26th: Foreign banks are permitted to operate in five new free-trade zones: Adra, Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia and Tartus.

2000 July, 3rd: Prime Minister Mustafa Miru announces an emergency plan to alleviate unemployment in Syria.

2000 July, 7th: Syria revokes its 30-year ban on private automobile imports.

2000 July, 10th: Bashar al-Assad is elected president in a national referendum.

2000 July, 17th: Bashar al-Assad orders the state media to refrain from using terms such as immortal president, to describe the late president and to curtail the use of magnification and glorification.

2000 July, 17th: Bashar al-Assad in his inaugural address, calls for serious economic reform, and a greater role for the private sector.

2000 July, 22nd: Bashar al-Assad decrees the establishment of Internet technology departments at the four Syrian public universities.

2000 August, 8th: Syria grants permission to three foreign banks to operate in special free-trade zones.

2000 August, 26th: Bashar al-Assad raises civil servant salaries by 25 per cent, the first such rise in six years.

2000 October, 1st: The state-owned al-Thawra publishes a stinging critique of rampant corruption and nepotism in the state bureaucracy.

2000 November, 15th: Bashar al-Assad signs an amnesty freeing approximately 600 Syrian and Lebanese political prisoners on the 30th anniversary of the Baath Party revolution.

2000 November, 19th: Bashar al-Assad decrees that al-Mezzeh prison will be transformed into a hospital.

2000 November, 29th: The Baath Party grants publishing rights to the other NPF parties, and permission to recruit members.

2000 December, 25th: The Syrian Saving Bank becomes the first institution in the country to offer credit cards.

2001 January, 1st: Bashar al-Assad's wedding to Asma al-Akhras, 25 year old daughter of a Syrian cardiologist in London, in a secret New Year's Day ceremony in Damascus.

2001 January, 7th: The Statement of 1,000 is published.

2001 January, 18th: The Syrian Telecommunications Establishment awards build-operate-transfer contracts to SyriaTel.

2001 January, 25th: Riad Seif, an independent MP, announces his intention to form the Social Peace party.

2001 February, 6th: The Baath Party Command decides to permit the establishment of private universities.

2001 February: Bashar al-Assad tells *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that opening the Syrian government to new political parties is a possibility, but does not set forth a timetable.

2001 February, 8th: Syrian security services begin demanding that salons submit an application for a license before they open their doors to private discussions.

2001 February, 21st: Baath Party officials say that the civil society activists in Syria misunderstood Bashar al-Assad's investiture speech last July, and went beyond the red lines and the national and pan-Arab constants.

2001 February, 26th: Ali Farzat, Syrian cartoonist, publishes the first issue of *al-Dommari*, a magazine featuring satire, cartoons, and social commentary.

2001 March, 21st: The Syrian parliament authorises the operations of private banks in Syria.

2001 April, 11th: Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass tells Abu Dhabi satellite television that he had evidence proving that the intellectuals who signed the Statement of 1,000 were agents of American intelligence.

2001 May: Bashar al-Assad decrees increasing civilian and military state employee salaries by 20 per cent and pensioners' allowances by 15 per cent.

2001 June, 14th: Syrian troops begin their first major withdrawal from Lebanon since Bashar al-Assad took power.

2001 September, 11th: Terrorists hijack four planes in the US and crash three of them into the World Trade Centre towers and the Pentagon.

2001 November, 25th: Bashar al-Assad issues his second sweeping amnesty, releasing at least 122 political prisoners, mainly Islamists.

2001 December, 8th: Bashar al-Assad signs into law a plan to create a new agency to combat unemployment.

2001 December, 13th: the closure of Tadmor prison in Palmyra.

2001 December, 13th: First cabinet reshuffle under Bashar al-Assad. Eighteen of the 33 appointed ministers are new faces.

2002 April, 3rd: Syria announces the second major withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon.

2002 August, 23rd-25th: The MB presides over a conference with other Syrian exile opposition parties to draw up a final version of a national covenant.

2002 October, 22nd: Bashar al-Assad decrees increasing private sector wages and salaries by 20 per cent.

2003 January, 28th: Bashar al-Assad decrees a law regulating new free-trade zones within the county.

2003 March, 19th: The USA-led coalition launches Operation Iraqi Freedom.

2003 March, 27th: Syrian mufti publicly calls for the Arab world to use all means possible to thwart the aggression, including martyr operations against the belligerent American, British and Zionist invaders in Iraq.

2003 May: The Syrian government publishes the final draft of an economic reform program setting benchmarks and targets for the next five years.

2003 May: Operating licenses are granted to two private universities and four private newspapers.

2003 May, 25th: Three private banks are granted operating licenses.

2003 September, 20th: A new cabinet is sworn in. Muhammad Naji al-Otari replaces Mustafa Miru as prime minister.

2003 October, 5th: Israel launches its first airstrike inside Syria since the 1973 war, bombing the Ain es Saheb camp outside of Damascus.

2003 November: A new income tax law is passed.

2003 November, 11th: The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 is passed.

2003 December, 8th: Prime Minister Naji al-Otari announces the impending merger of two of the three major Syrian newspapers.

2004 February: Bashar al-Assad signs an amnesty freeing approximately 120 political prisoners, mainly from Islamist parties and the Iraqi wing of the Baath Party.

2004 February, 15th: Bashar al-Assad decrees abolishing the economic security courts that had been in place since 1977.

2004 March, 12th: A riot breaks out in the predominantly Kurdish north-eastern Syrian city of Qamishli.

2004 May, 11th: Bashar al-Assad decrees a 20 per cent rise in civil servant salaries.

2004 July, 15th: The Syrian government grants the first operating license to an Islamic bank in Syria.

2004 July, 15th: Bashar al-Assad decrees a partial amnesty for prisoners serving sentences for economic and other minor crimes.

2004 September, 1st: Grand mufti of Syria since 1964, Ahmed Kuftaro dies at age 89.

2004 September, 21st: Syria begins a comprehensive redeployment in Lebanon.

2004 September, 26th: Rifaat al-Assad reportedly returns from exile to Syria.

2004 November, 20th: Assef Shawkat is prompted to second-in-command of Syrian Military Intelligence.

2005 February, 14th: Assassination of Rafic al-Hariri, the prime minister of Lebanon between 1992-1998, in Beirut.

2010 December, 18th: The Arab Spring starts with protests in Tunisia.

2011 January, 14th: The Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali flees to Saudi Arabia.

2011 January, 25th: The Arab Spring starts in Egypt.

2011 February, 11th: The Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak resigns.

2011 February, 17th: The Arab Spring starts in Libya.

2011 March, 15th: Protests in southern city of Daraa, within the context of the Arab Spring.

2011 October, 20th: The Libyan leader, Muammar al-Gathafi assassinated.

2012, July 18th: Bombing results in the deaths of the Minister of Defence Daoud Rajha, his deputy Assef Shawkat, the head of the National Security Bureau Hisham Bakhtiar, the head of the Crisis Management Cell Hassan Turkmani, and the injury of the Minister of Interior Mohammad al-Shaar.

2015, September 30th: Russia carries out its first air strikes on Syria.

(SANA, 2018; BBC, 2018; Leverett, 2005).

Abduallah al-Ahmar: Assistant Secretary-General of the Baath Party's National Command.

Abduallah Dardari: Head of the State Planning Commission between 2003-2005, and Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs between 2005-2011.

Abdul Halim Khaddam: Vice-president of Syria between 1984-2005 who held a strong position until he resigned and fled the country in 2005.

Adib Mayaleh: Governor of the Central Bank of Syria, and President of the Monetary and Credit Board.

Adnan Makhlouf: Major-General commanding the Presidential Guard between 1976-1997.

Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun: The Grand Mufti of Syria since 2005.

Ahmed Kuftaro: The Grand Mufti of Syria between 1964-2005.

Ali Aslan: Lieutenant-General, Chief of Staff of the Syrian army between 1998-2002.

Ali Duba: Lieutenant-General, Head of the Syrian Military Intelligence since 1974, and Deputy Chief of the General Staff in addition to his role between 1993-1999.

Ali Haydar: Major-General, Commander of the Syrian Special Forces between 1968-1994.

Ali Khuri: Major-General, Head of the General Intelligence Directorate since 1998.

Ali Mamlouk: Major-General, former Director of the Air Force Intelligence, and former Head of the General Security Directorate.

Ali Sadereddine Bayanouni: Muslim Brethren leader in exile in London.

Anisa Makhlouf: The spouse of Hafez al-Assad, and mother of Bashar al-Assad.

Asma al-Akhras: The spouse of Bashar al-Assad.

Assef Shawkat: The brother-in-law of Bashar al-Assad, and Director of Military Intelligence between 2005-2009.

Ayyad Mahmud: Brigadier-General, Head of the External Branch of the General Intelligence Directorate.

Bahjat Suleiman: Brigadier-General, Head of the Internal Branch of the General Intelligence Directorate.

Bashar al-Assad: President of Syria since 2000.

Bashir Najjar: Head of the General Intelligence Directorate between 1994-1998.

Bouthaina Shaaban: The political and media advisor to Bashar al-Assad.

Farouq al-Sharaa: Foreign Minister of Syria between 1984-2006, and Vice-President thereafter.

Fawaz al-Akhras: Father-in-law of Bashar al-Assad, and Founding Director of the British Syrian Society.

Firas Tlass: Son of Mustafa Tlass, and a business tycoon, who had close relations with Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad.

Gamal Abdel Nasser: The second president of Egypt between 1956-1970.

Hafez al-Assad: President of Syria between 1970-2000.

Hafez Makhlouf: The maternal cousin of Bashar al-Assad, and the brother of Rami Makhlouf. He was the Head of the internal branch of the General Security Directorate until 2014.

Hasan Habannakeah al-Maydani: A Sunni cleric who influenced leading scholars in Syria including Mohamed Said Ramadan al-Bouti.

Hassan Khalil: Major-General, Head of the Syrian Military Intelligence since 2000, succeeding Lieutenant-General Ali Duba.

Hikmat al-Shihabi: Colonel-General, Chief of Staff of the Syrian army between 1974-1998.

Issam al-Attar: Supreme Guide of the Syrian Muslim Brethren between 1961-1980, and the brother of Najah al-Attar.

Jamil al-Assad: A younger brother of Hafez al-Assad, and an MP between 1971-2004.

Maher al-Assad: The younger brother of Bashar al-Assad. Brigadier-General, Commander of the Republican Guard, and the Fourth Armoured Division.

Mahmoud al-Zuabi: Prime Minister of Syria between 1987-2000, and a member of the Regional Command of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party.

Mamoun al-Homsi: Former independent MP.

Mamoun Rahma: Preacher of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Manaf Tlass: Brigadier-General of the Republican Guard, and member of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle.

Marwan Sheikho: Former independent MP, and preacher.

Mohammad Makhlouf: Bashar al-Assad's uncle, and father of Hafez and Rami Makhlouf.

Mohamed Said Ramadan al-Bouti: A notable Sunni Muslim scholar.

Mohammad Habash: An Islamic scholar, writer and a former independent MP. He was the principal figure of the Islamic revivalist movement in Syria.

Mohammad Hamsho: A Sunni businessman, brother-in-law of Maher al-Assad.

Muhammad al-Khuli: Major-General, Chief of the Syrian Air Force between 1994-1999, and Chief of the Air Force Intelligence between 1970-1987.

Mustafa Tlass: Colonel-General, Syrian Minister of Defence between 1972-2004, and a member of the Regional Command of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party.

Najah al-Attar: Vice-President of Syria since 2006, and a member of the Regional Command of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party. She was the Minister of Culture between 1976-2000.

Naji al-Otari: Prime Minister of Syria between 2003-2011, and a member of the Regional Command of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party.

Omar Sankar: A former independent MP, and exclusive agent of Mercedes-Benz in Syria.

Rafic al-Hariri: Lebanese Sunni business tycoon and Prime Minister of Lebanon between 2000-2004.

Rami Makhlouf: The maternal cousin of Bashar al-Assad, and is considered the wealthiest man and one of the most powerful men in Syria.

Riad Seif: A businessperson and former independent MP.

Rifaat al-Assad: A younger brother of Hafez al-Assad. Major-General, Vice-President of Syria between 1984-1998, and a member the Regional Command of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Baath Party.

Walid Muallem: Foreign Minister.

II.   Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis introduces the concept of plutocracy to explain President Bashar al-Assad's[4] regime management of political power and response to calls for greater democracy in Syria between 2000-2018. It tests the concept of plutocracy against the contested nature of democracy in Syria throughout a series of popular movements in 2000, 2005 and 2011 with a focus on democratic actors. It identifies the plutocracy, and traces its emergence and its interaction with democracy within the Syrian system. Using the case study, the thesis suggests that plutocracy, defined as the rule of the wealthy, emerged since the 1970s in response to internal and external context and interaction between Islam and democracy.

Plutocracy was not an ideological, theoretical or conceptual idea, but a defined political and economic system. The thesis argues that the Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the al-Zuabis are plutocrats whose transactional approach to power was for their own interest and the interest of the regime in a two-way complementary relationship. The regime needed the plutocracy for governance and survival, and the plutocracy needed the regime to advance its economic interests. The thesis analyses the response of the regime and the plutocracy to calls for greater democracy in their own sectors and throughout their business networks. It defines plutocracy as an elite of the wealthy surrounding the president. They govern the society and control different sectors through a network of connections within the military, the Baath Party and the state institutions for

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[4] The title of President Bashar al-Assad was used in the first occurrence in this thesis. It was dropped thereafter because of the large number of times it has been used.

the advancement of their economic interests and the interests of the regime, at the expense of other national interests.

The thesis critically reviews, traces and explains the emergence of plutocracy in the Syrian society. It identifies the plutocrats, and makes the argument that they governed the society through their wealth, not their positions, because their successors and predecessors in the same positions, did not have wealth, did not have the same powers in governance. The thesis identifies the social and political context within which plutocracy emerged, developed and was challenged. It analyses the response of the regime and the plutocracy to demands for democracy in the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration, and differences in response to the 2011 revolt.

Research question

How does the concept of plutocracy explain the response of Bashar al-Assad's regime to calls for greater democracy in Syria between 2000-2018? The thesis tests the concept of plutocracy against the contested nature of democracy in Syria throughout a series of popular movements in 2000, 2005 and 2011 with focus on democratic actors such as the parliament, the constitution and civil society organisations.

Gap in literature

Very little has been written on the study of plutocracy in its application to the calls for greater democracy in Syria between 2000-2018, because the regime has been overwhelmingly simplistically described as sectarian. Few studies have analysed

the complexity of the Syrian system, and the link between the al-Assad family, the plutocracy, the security, the state institutions and the democratic actors. This gap has not been identified by the literature on the Syrian system or by the most relevant authors in the field such as David Lesch and Patrick Seale. Joshua Landis[5] noted that the essence of the Syrian regime, a minority-led security state, is that it has to buy loyalty, and that's through patronage and corruption, rather than rule of law (Landis, 2017). Landis referred to corruption, but his use of minority remained open to different interpretations whether he intended Alawite, family, structures or the wealthy.

The considerable controversy over how the regime may be best conceptualised reflects its complex nature. The regime came to power by a military coup and the army is a central pillar, but it is not an army-party symbiosis, nor mere military rule (Rabinovich, 1972). The Alawites have a considerable domination over the regime, but it is not simply a minority regime and it incorporates a cross-sectarian coalition (Van Dam, 1981). At its centre is the personal dictatorship of President Hafez al-Assad,[6] but his powers rests on complex institutions (Perthes, 1995). It rose out of, and incorporates a significant village base (Van Dusen, 1975), but is highly structured on Bourgeoisie (Perthes, 1995). Thus, no single one of the typical explanations of the regime whether army, sect or class, adequately captures its complex multi-sided nature (Hinnebusch, 2002).

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[5] Director of the University of Oklahoma's Centre for Middle East Studies.
[6] The title of President Hafez al-Assad was used in the first occurrence in this thesis. It was dropped thereafter because of the large number of times it has been used.

The original contribution

This thesis makes an original and important contribution to the study of plutocracy in its application to the calls for greater democracy in Syria between 2000-2018. The contribution is not to the theoretical, conceptual or intellectual questions surrounding plutocracy, but is about the case study. The original contribution is the making of a claim to explain the cause of events surrounding the calls for greater democracy in the last two decades, against the concept of plutocracy and its responses to these calls. It is the application of plutocracy in Syria to explain the regime's management of popular calls for greater democracy in the country beyond the previous simplistic configurations of the regime, in a way that enables analysis that transcends narrow reliance on sectarian readings of the regime. The originality of the thesis lies in its review of scholarly literature on Islam and democracy, and the inclusion of material gleaned from interviews with figures inside the system.

Methodology

The research uses process tracing to trace causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how plutocracy emerged and developed in a thematic trajectory since the 1970s. This method matches the research because, in theory, it is used to gain a greater understanding of the causal dynamics that produced the outcome of a particular historical case, and to shed light on generalisable causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes within a population of causally similar cases. Process tracing can be used for either theory-building or theory-testing purposes. The research uses theory-testing because, in theory, it is

used where a hypothesis about the observable manifestations is tested empirically in a case. It involves more than the production of detailed, descriptive narratives of the events between the occurrence of a purported cause and an outcome. Instead, process tracing probes the theoretical causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes together (Beach, 2017; Bennett, 2014: 276-298).

Sixteen semi-structured quality interviews were conducted for this qualitative research. After receiving informed consent, all interviews were conducted via telephone or Skype, and were recorded and transcribed professionally. The research uses semi-structured interviews because it allows covering various issues concerning the research question. It is more flexible than structured interviews, and it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the responses of the interviewees (Rubin, 2005: 88). When undertaking these interviews, using a checklist helped covering all relevant areas in question. This checklist allowed for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study (Berg, 2007: 39).

The interviewees and sources were carefully selected to represent different perspectives, with no exclusion criteria. Other sources, inside and outside Syria, were consulted to mitigate any potential bias. The interviewees included pro regime, opposition forces, and independent personnel and intellectuals as well as affiliates and non-affiliates of the Baath Party. Interviews were conducted with state officials, former state officials, defected officials, diplomats, military officers,

civil society activists and academics. The age group was between 18-70 of both males and females based in Syria, Turkey, Qatar, Germany, the UK and the US. Interviews ranged from 1-2 hours and participants did not receive any compensation. Informed consent was obtained via the attached form. The form and its intention were clearly explained. Participants were provided with written and verbal instruction about the interview process and provided opportunity to ask questions. The signed forms will be kept on record in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office within the School of Government and Society for three years, and then they will be destroyed.

Participants were provided with a clear description of the purpose of the research during the informed consent period, therefore there was no need for follow-up materials providing a more complete description of the purpose of the research. Participants received a transcript of the interview within two weeks from the date of the interview to ensure accuracy or to submit questions, changes or clarifications. During the informed consent period, participants were informed orally and in writing that they could withdraw from the research, and were provided with the phone number and email of the researcher in order to exercise that right anytime within three months from the date of the interview. There were no consequences whatsoever if interviewees were to withdraw. The interview material would be destroyed and all reference to the material would be deleted from the research.

The names and positions of the interviewees are important in this research. The interviewees agreed in writing, and signed a consent form to reveal their names and positions. They were consulted on how they would like to be described and referred to in the research. They also agreed to ascribe the data to their preferred description. Interviews were transcribed by professional transcription services. Data is stored within a password protected computer in a locked office within the University of Birmingham. All data storage and retention requirements in the University of Birmingham's Code of Practice for research was followed. In particular, following completion of the research, data will be preserved and accessible for ten years.

Online video sources from media such as BBC, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Orient, Dubai, Al-Aan and Barada helped obtain, interpret and analyse data in association with the primary source base. They create an entirely new form of interviews and reveal rich in-depth details about the questions which they have witnessed or experienced. The interviewees in online video sources from media are outstanding figures who could not otherwise be easily accessible such as the president, the ruling elite or the plutocracy. They provided a wealth of information through a variety of diverse interviews with politicians, army commanders, religious figures and MPs representing different views. Nonetheless, online video sources have methodological disadvantages such as bias when advocating a political agenda. In online video sources from media, the researcher is passive and unable to practise a more central or influential role in formulating the questions or follow-up (Benkler,

2013). Online video sources and the context of the interviews were compared, contrasted and analysed against other sources to mitigate any potential bias.

The empirical data were analysed to triangulate data in three empirical chapters covering the period between 2000-2018. The research uses grounded theory because of its interactive relation between concept and data, and also constant comparison across types of evidence to control the conceptual level and scope of emerging theory. The goal is to seek a theory that is intimately tied with the evidence, so that the resultant theory is likely to be consistent with empirical data (Orlikowski, 1993; Eisenhardt, 1989). It fits in the research because it is founded on the premise that the generation of theory at various levels is indispensable for a deep understanding of social phenomena (Glaser, 1978), and emphasises theory development (Strauss, 1998). Theory is grounded when it emerges from and generates explanations for relationships and events that reflect the life experiences of those people and processes. The obtained data was compared and contrasted with other primary data, such as the Syrian official newspapers, in addition to the official websites such as SANA, the Ministry of Information, the Baath Party, the parliament, and the interviews, speeches and statements of Bashar al-Assad.

Secondary sources were consulted in both English and Arabic on the theoretical and empirical side. Reading covered every key source on the background and context of the issues around the Syrian regime, democracy, and reform and thus the gaps in the scholarship. My previous career, background and experience with

the state institutions, civil society organisations and international organisations put me in a good place to approach key officials and to overcome research challenges and limitations. As a former diplomat, I have known or worked with most of the interviewees. The Foreign Office in Syria is the focal point for all the state institutions, including the parliament, media and religious institutions. At the same time, the Foreign Office is the focal point for non-state, independent and international bodies and figures, which availed me the opportunity to get to know or to work with them.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters: an introduction, theoretical framework, historical analytical narrative, three analytical chapters and a conclusion. Chapter Two frames the thesis conceptually by reviewing various theoretical understandings of the context and conditions that influenced the people's understanding of democracy and debates in the period 2000-2018. It reviews the thoughts of Lebanese and Egyptian authors of the *al-Nahda*,[7] Nasserism, Baathism and their interaction with Islam as a religion, culture and tradition. It introduces plutocracy as an outcome of interaction among different conceptual understandings. Chapter Three critically reviews, traces and explains the ways in which the socio-political dynamics of Hafez al-Assad's era established the inheritance of Bashar al-Assad in terms of the regime's shape and its plutocratic

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[7] Arabic word meaning 'awakening'. The *al-Nahda* was a cultural movement that began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Egypt, then moved to Ottoman-ruled Arabic-speaking regions including Syria and Lebanon.

tendencies. It identifies the social and political context within which it developed, applied or was challenged between 1970-2000.

Chapter Four analyses plutocracy which was applied by the regime to organise political power and demands for greater democracy between 2000-2005. It identifies the plutocrats, and empirically charts the development of plutocracy and interaction with the Damascus Spring as the first democratic attempt in 30 years. Chapter Five focuses on the development of the plutocracy between 2005-2011 and its interaction with the Damascus Declaration. It argues that plutocracy was applied by the regime to organise political power and demands for greater democracy. The plutocracy responded by effectively adapting to the challenges. The adaptation of the plutocracy was to create an institutional structure that can deal with the threat of civil society movement. Chapter Six offers a sustained analysis of the year 2011 as a different key moment from the years 2000 and 2005 in the development of the plutocracy and the social movement, as well as the interaction and response of the plutocracy to the social movement. It argues that the year 2011 differs because of the changes in the internal and external context and conditions. The regime responded by adaptation and repression because of the severity of the challenge.

In chapter Seven, I offer my conclusions. The chapter reviews the key findings and analysis of the case study. It demonstrates that plutocracy was applied by the regime to organise political power and demands for greater democracy. An elite group of wealthy surrounded the president and derived power from their wealth to

govern the society through a network of connections, the Baath Party and Alawism. The Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the al-Zuabis are plutocrats whose transactional approach to power was for their own interest and the interest of the regime in a two-way complementary relationship. The regime needed the plutocracy for governance and survival, and the plutocracy needed the regime to advance its economic interests. Plutocracy was not a political idea or a standalone concept, but a type of regime which had emerged since the 1970s in response to internal and external conditions.

III.   Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter frames the thesis conceptually by reviewing various theoretical understandings of the context and conditions that influenced the people's understanding of democracy and debates in the period 2000-2018; nationalism, social justice and Islam (Hourani, 1991: 451). It reviews the thoughts of Lebanese and Egyptian authors of the *al-Nahda*, as well as Nasserism, Baathism and their interaction with Islam as a religion, culture and tradition. It introduces plutocracy as an outcome of interaction among different conceptual understandings. The operative definition of plutocracy in this thesis is a government by the wealthy, a country or society governed by the wealthy, an elite or ruling class of people whose power derives from their wealth. It is a tiny group, just one-quarter of 1 per cent of the population, and it is not representative of the rest of the nation, but its money buys plenty of access (Khalid, 2016; Chomsky, 2013; Stiglitz, 2011; Herbert, 1998).

This chapter looks conceptually at the conditions that contributed to the development or regress, evolution or devolution of plutocracy. It looks at the specific conceptual, political and cultural context within which it developed or was challenged, and interaction between Islam and democracy. The Syrian society was primarily influenced by the thoughts of Lebanese and Egyptian authors after the *al-Nahda*. However, the reception of these concepts was influenced by the history, culture and religion. A certain Islamic element would always remain important in that combination of ideas which made people's culture and identity, extending beyond the highly educated elite to the larger stratum of those who were brought into some kind of political participation by education and the mass media. Whether it was the Islam of the modernists or that of the MB, on the whole it remained a subordinate element in the system (Hourani, 1991: 401).

Much of contemporary thought on democracy revolved around the dilemma of past and present. The political structure within which most Arabs had lived for four centuries under the Ottoman occupation, and decades under Western occupation had disintegrated. The Ottoman Dynasty[8] which identified itself as the guardian of what was left of the power and independence of Sunni Islam had vanished in 1922. The capital of the new Turkish state was not Istanbul but Ankara in the Anatolian highlands. The great city which had been the seat of power for long had lost its force. These changes had a deep effect on the way in which politically conscious Arabs thought of themselves and tried to define their political identity. It posed

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[8] Founded by Osman I in 1299.

questions about the way in which they should live together in political community, and catalysed feelings creating expectations of change (Hourani, 1991: 316).

The meeting point in this chapter is plutocracy versus democracy. In practice, plutocracy and democracy define themselves against each other. Plutocracy emerged since the 1970s and started to affect the theoretical consideration of democracy. It takes its meaning not only as a standalone economic control, but also of its control of institutions in the context of democracy. While a democracy means a representative parliament, multi-party system, responsible judicial system, elections, free press and agencies that are not in the hands of the elite, the plutocratic approach means that state institutions are accountable to the elite system. Like democracy, when plutocracy is put into an Islamic context it is perceived differently. The plutocracy itself may claim to be democratic, and introduces itself as another way of governing to address the interaction between Islam and democracy and bridge that gap safely. A thorough understanding of this dialectic begins with understanding the debates of democracy in the Islamic world that had developed for centuries.

The compatibility between Islam and democracy

The lack of reference to theocracy, and the negative attitude of the Quran towards kings (sura 27:34)[9] suggest that the political message of Islam was to establish a republican order of rule. The Quran and *sunnah*[10] do not describe a methodology

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[9] Indeed kings – when they enter a city, they ruin it and render the honoured of its people humbled. And thus they do.

[10] The body of social and legal literature which discusses and prescribes the traditional customs and practices often based on the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds, sayings and permissions of Muhammad.

for the appointment or removal of the head of state, and prophet Muhammad[11] died without nominating a successor or a type of rule. However, God commands Muslims to hand over their trust to competent candidates (sura 4:59). Selection involves planning and wisdom and is based on competence, efficiency and merits in accordance with the rules in effect. The period of the four *Rashidun* Caliphs (632-661) marked the adoption of different modes for the appointment of the head of state, but were all confirmed by the Muslim community expressing their consent by *baiyat*.[12]

Despite the variation in methodology, the nomination of the head of state shared similar features of selection through initial election, nomination by the preceding caliph, or election through an electoral college, followed by a private *baiyat*, and subsequently the confirmation of the appointment through a public *baiyat*, which could be viewed as founded on the principles of democracy and justice, and as an early example of a democratic state (Bontekoe, 1997: 245-247). The selection of a caliph is processed through free elections, and is based only on moral qualifications and the approval of the majority of the Muslim community. Upright Non-Arab and slave Muslims are equally eligible if competent to the responsibilities and duties of the position. A caliph is selected based only on moral qualifications and with the approval of the majority of the Muslim community. His

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[11] The title of Prophet Muhammad was used in the first occurrence in this thesis. It was dropped thereafter because of the large number of times it has been used.
[12] Arabic word meaning 'referendum'.

authority is restricted and could be deposed by his own people if found unfit (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Analysing the political message of Islam on democracy, the *shura*[13] could have developed into a representative institution and the process of *ijtihad*[14] could have been initiated in the form of law-making through *ijma*.[15] However, the efforts of the four *Rashidun* Caliphs in the first republic in Islam failed in achieving a permanent democratisation. Subsequently, the Sunni-Shia split reflected upon the development of democracy in the Islamic world and brought it to a halt (Al-Hibri, 1998-1999: 492-527). Muslims divided themselves into different intolerant political groups and fought against each other, which subverted the political message of Islam, and diversified its attitude on democracy. Ameer Ali[16] (1849-1928) marked the end of the *Rashidun* Caliphate as the end of the republic of Islam, where different interpretations of Islam and of democracy started to develop in accordance with the context.

The Quran, *hadiths*[17] and *sunnah* comprised different examples on human rights and liberties which citizens were aware of (Ridha, 1936), such as the equality of all citizens before the law and equality in status and opportunity (sura 4:1), freedom of religion (sura 2:256), right to life (sura 17:33), right to property (sura 2:188), right not to bear the responsibilities and wrongs of the others (sura 53:38),

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[13] Arabic word meaning 'mutual consultation'.
[14] An Islamic legal term referring to independent reasoning or the thorough exertion of a jurist's mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question.
[15] Arabic word meaning 'consensus'.
[16] An Indian Islamist jurist.
[17] Arabic word meaning 'speeches of Muhammad'.

freedom of opinion (sura 4:148), freedom of movement (sura 67:15), freedom of association (sura 3:104), right of privacy (sura 2:189), right to access the basic needs of life (sura 51:19), right of reputation (sura 49:11-12), and right to decision in accordance with proper judicial procedures (sura 49:6). The *sunnah* recognises the right of freedom, which entails that detention is only permissible under the orders of the court, or for the purposes of investigation (Al-Tabakh, 1932). It recognises the right of the second party to be heard in the same way as the first party has been heard (Ali, 2013). No one can be imprisoned on false or unproved charges, and no one can be imprisoned without due course of justice (Yakoub, 1979).

Muhammad Iqbal[18] (1877-1938) argues that modern Muslims are perfectly capable of appreciating their positions, and are expected to reconstruct their social lives in the light of the ultimate principles and evolve an Islamic spiritual democracy. The first occurrence of spiritual democracy was in Iqbal's philosophical and political literature to identify a democratic state which is based on the principle of respect and freedom of all religions as provided in the Quran (sura 49: 13; sura 5:45).[19] [20] Empirically, *tauhid*[21] stands for human equality, solidarity and freedom. The state, therefore, is an effort to transform these ideal principles into space-time forces

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[18] An eminent modern Muslim thinker.

[19] For each of you we have appointed a law and a way. And if God had willed He would have made you a (religious) community. But (He hath willed it otherwise) that He may put you to the test in what He has given you. So compete with one another in good works. Unto God will ye be brought back, and He will inform you about that wherein ye differed.

[20] O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

[21] Arabic word meaning 'unity of God'.

and an endeavour to realise them in a definite human organisation. Iqbal views that Muslims succeeded in building a great empire, but thereby they largely repaganised their political ideals, and lost sight of some of the most important potentialities of their faith, which would only be restored by the formation of popularly elected legislative assemblies (Iqbal, 1964).

Islam makes it incumbent upon Muslims to subordinate their decisions to the guidance of the divine law as revealed in the Quran and explained in the *sunnah.* This obligation has been controversial in whether it imposes definite limits on the community's sovereignty and right to legislate, which form an integral part of the Western concept of democracy. Muhammad Asad[22] (1900-1992) viewed that Islam is perfectly compatible with democracy. Viewed from this historical perspective, democracy, as conceived in the modern West is infinitely nearer to the Islamic than to the ancient Greek concept of liberty; for Islam maintains that all human beings are socially equal and must, therefore, be given the same opportunities for development and self-expression (Asad, 1961: 19).

Sovereignty of the state and the freedom of the legislator to exercise his power are subordinate to the sovereignty of God (Ahmad, 1958: 141-146). However, the traditional Islamic jurisprudence acknowledges the powers of the legislator to suspend, restrict or expand the application of a Quranic rule of law if the interests of the state require it. For example, *Mithaq-al-Medina* was based on the concept that all authority in the universe is vested in God whose sovereignty is absolute,

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[22] An Islamic scholar and political thinker.

yet does not curtail the sovereignty of the state. *Sulh Al-Hudaybiya*[23] was an example of legislation by the head of state to take an action, function and interpret the laws without any celestial restrictions on the sovereignty of the state as long as it is in the interest of the state or community (Bontekoe, 1997: 242-243).

Islamists, such as Sayyid Abdl Ala Maududi (1903-1979) conceived an Islamic state that would be an Islamic democracy and would eventually rule the Earth (Maududi, 1960: 35). He perceived an Islamic state that would be ruled by the entire Muslim community, not the *ulema.*[24] He rejected theocracy, and proposed forming a Muslim 'theodemocracy' in which Islamic law guides public policy (Ullah, 2013: 79). Maududi's vision was controversially criticised by Choueiri as an ideological state in which legislators do not legislate, citizens only vote to reaffirm the permanent applicability of God's laws, women rarely venture outside their homes lest social discipline is disrupted, and non-Muslims are tolerated as foreign elements required to express their loyalty by means of paying financial levy (Choueiri, 2010: 144).

Edward Said[25] (1935-2003) argues that his theory of orientalism (Said, 1978) explains the Western perception of democracy in Islam. Orientalism, defined in 1978, as the West's patronising representations of the East – the societies and people who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, has contributed to the cultural paradigm that dominated the Middle Eastern and

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[23] It was a pivotal treaty between Muhammad, representing the state of Medina, and the Quraysh tribe of Mecca in the year 628. It helped decrease tension between the two cities, and affirmed a 10-year peace.
[24] Arabic word meaning 'Islamic scholars'.
[25] Professor of literature at Columbia University.

Islamic politics (Samiei, 2010: 1145-1160). Muslims are taken for granted as either ademocratic or anti-democratic due to their belief system (Said, 1979). Yahya Sadowski[26] argued that by virtue of being Muslims they hardly have the potential for democratic political culture unless Muslims give up their understanding of mainstream Islam (Sadowski, 1993: 14-21). Elie Kedourie[27] (1926-1992) argued that to simultaneously hold ideas which are not easily reconcilable produces a deep confusion in the Arab public mind, at least about the meaning of democracy. The confusion is, however, understandable since the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mindset of Islam (Kedourie, 1994: 1). Samuel Huntington[28] (1927-2008) argued that Islam is a religion that is fundamentally anti-democratic and does not differentiate the realm of Caesar from the realm of God (Huntington, 1984).

The orientalist inductive/deductive causality between Islam and autocracy has been challenged as follows:

1- Muslims are not unique compared to other non-developed countries (Abootalebi, 2000). The dearth of democracy in Muslim cultures is not necessarily attributed to Islam, but other qualities such as tribalism and illiteracy, which have been seen by the modernisation theory as not conducive to democracy (Fandy, 1994).

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[26] Professor of political economy in the Central European University.
[27] A British historian of the Middle East.
[28] An American political scientist at Harvard University.

2- Muslims are not monolithic in their interpretation of Islam or democracy. With the multitude and diversity of Muslim cultures (Price, 1999), Muslims end up adopting their own version of adapted democracy (Kabuli, 1994).

3- Muslim culture and tradition are not merely an embodiment of Islam. The beliefs of Muslims were shaped, in addition to Islam, by several non-Islamic factors of nationalism and colonialism (Kurzman, 1998).

Neo-orientalism, founded post 9/11, views no compatibility between secular democracy and Arab Islamic culture. It establishes a link between autocracy and Islam as having a history of authoritarian power structure and undemocratic beliefs (Weiffen, 2004). Neo-orientalists argue that the Islamic doctrine is the cause of anti-democratic culture and the result of the dearth of democracy in most Muslim countries, which has been viewed by their critics as a confusion between causation and correlation. Neo-orientalists argue that Islam is a religion of the two cities. It determines a constitutionality in which there is no rift between the political and the religious. It unifies norms and institution. The law is the embodiment of the faith. The state directs prayers, protects religion, and administers a secular society (Ben Achour, 1999 cited in Abdel Fattah, 2004: 3-4).

The neo-orientalist perception of the present vicissitudes as a consequence of the past Islamic history needs further empirical examination. The dearth of democracy in Muslim societies is a phenomenon that goes beyond the simplistic view on /compatibility between Islam and democracy and the correlation with autocracy. Muslim scholars consider the neo-orientalist theory of incompatibility an offensive allegation and reflection of prejudice against Islam. Most neo-orientalists

investigate Islam through a macro-historical perspective and scrutinise across large spans of history, constitutive elements of Islamic faith, and some features of Middle Eastern languages in order to construct a grand schema, usually utilised to extract law-like generalisations about Islam and Muslims (Ansary, 1996).

Neo-orientalists portray Muslims as indifferent or negative towards democracy, attracted by fanatical anti-Western religious discourse, ambivalent or unaware of the advantages of democracy, and unlikely to accept it. Contrasting this portrait with empirical evidence from 2001-2002 surveys by educated Muslims, the evidence contradicts the image of the democratic deficit described the by neo-orientalists. The findings suggest that the neo-orientalists may have investigated only one group, which is the most radical of Muslims. They have also adopted a definition of culture that will circularly lead to the causality of Islam and autocracy, and tend to define culture as shared values legitimating social practices (Wildavsky, 1987: 6). This definition has been criticised in that there is rarely consensus within a culture, which suggests the arousal of the need to revisit the arguments that put Muslims in one basket and perceive them as antidemocratic (Norris, 2002).

The neo-orientalist theory of incompatibility between Islam and democracy is built on Mill's method of agreement (Abdel Fattah, 2004: 3): if two or more instances of the phenomenon under investigation have only one circumstance in common, the circumstance in which alone all the instances agree, is the cause (or effect) of the given phenomenon (Mill, 1843: 454). Neo-orientalists perceived too common characteristics and several historical, economic and political differences amongst

Muslim countries, which made them establish a link between Islam and the lack of democracy in a cause-effect manner. Nonetheless, Mill's method of agreement has been highly criticised as misleading (Skocpol, 1979), and the values and attitudes of Muslims do not obstruct or decelerate the democratisation process.

The over/misuse of Quran and *hadiths* by politicians, scholars or intellectuals to (un)prove an argument provides a possible explanation for the generation of competing readings of compatibility between Islam and democracy. Islam has become the battlefield of contesting and conflicting sects, which Tareq al-Bishri[29] (1933-) tagged as a cultural or intellectual civil war among Muslim intellectuals, scholars and activists (Al-Bishri, 1998). The integration of politics within Islam has led Western scholars to infer that Islamic exceptionalism makes Muslims' system of belief the least compatible with modernity due to its immunity to the general forces of secularisation (Casanova, 2001).

The contemporary profound engagement of Islamists in a democratic project could be viewed as an attempt to read democratic practice into Islamic sources and to uphold their right to borrow what democracy and how much democracy as befits culture, history and local values. Larbi Sadiki[30] believes that contesting and rethinking Islam and democracy provide a potentially coherent gestation that argues well for good government. He redefines democracy as a fluidity of power so that no single claimant, contestant or human actor can monopolise power, regardless of the ideas, truths and set of knowledge from which they derive their

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[29] An Egyptian jurist.
[30] A political scientist, and senior lecturer in the University of Exeter.

hierarchal position in society (Sadiki, 2004: 64-65). His notes were criticised by Roxanne Leslie Euben [31] (1966-) that it is not at all clear that the increasing contestability of all certainties automatically bodes well for good government, and that the fact that there is no systematic argument about what good government entails makes such declarations difficult to assess (Euben, 2006).

Sadiki approaches the perennially challenging area of political enquiry on the compatibility between Islam and democracy by questioning both Western and Eastern philosophy, and interrogating oriental and occidental discourses of democracy. He approaches the question of democracy in Arab politics by presenting various discourses of democracy in a global milieu of fluidity and contestability and debates on how to be a democrat and how to be a Muslim. A contest over 'which', 'whose' and 'how much' democracy takes place within an existing contest over 'which', 'whose' and 'how much' Islam must be given pre-eminence in the political and cultural sphere. There is a 'democracy' and there are 'democracies'. There is an 'Islam' and there are 'Islams'. The diversity of attempts at living up to the ideal of each is what gives rise to variable interpretations of each (Sadiki, 2004).

Sadiki attempts to enact the democratic ethos by interrogating its own assumptions and categories. He builds his theoretical approach to democracy on al-Farabi as a source of inspiration to contemporary Muslims to engage with democracy. He argues for a destabilisation of a series of oppositions that currently

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[31] Professor of political science in Wellesley College.

govern much of scholarship and political practice between the East and the West, orientalism and occidentalism, reason and revelation, politics and religion, democracy and Islam (Euben, 2006; Abecasis-Phillips, 2004: 779-780). He seeks an Islamic ethos of anti-foundationalism, communication with a difference and pluralisation within and without. He derives anti-foundationalist ethos from Islam, premised on the existence of a transcendent divinity who has bequeathed to humanity not only a moral code but also an entire way of life. The unity of God, and the belief in God through holy scripture is the ultimate foundationalism, but everything else is open. Under Islam, God alone is not looked upon as another site of power open for human contestability or contestation (Sadiki, 2004: 77).

It was necessary to find a new kind of religious thought which would draw out of the Quran and *hadiths* a new jurisprudence which was adapted to the needs of the modern world. Fazlur Rahman Malik[32] (1919-1988) suggested a method which he claimed would be true to the spirit of Islam but would provide for the needs of modern life. The Quran was a divine response, through the prophet's mind, to the moral and social situation at the time. In order to apply its teaching to the moral and social situation of a different age, it was necessary to extract the general principle inherent in that divine response. This could be done by studying the specific circumstances in which the response had been revealed in the light of an understanding of the Quran as a unity. He argued that the proper interpretation of Islam was an historical one, moving with precision from the present to the past

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[32] Modernist scholar and philosopher of Islam.

and back again, which demanded a new kind of religious education (Rahman, 1982).

Arab independence and the *al-Nahda*

The vision of the *al-Nahda* intellectuals on democracy was influenced by Islam and the West (Hourani, 1991: 304). Some of them were influenced by the Islamic religion and the heritage of the *ummah*[33] and adhered to Ottomanism, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afaghani, or to Arabism, such as Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, while others were influenced by the concepts of the French Revolution and the West. New political concepts and terminology entered the Arab lexicon, including nation, nationalism, secularism, homeland, parliament, civil society, parties, associations, dictatorship, separation of powers and social contract. The ideas of the French Revolution came to the Middle East after Napoleon Bonaparte's (1769-1821) campaign on Egypt in 1789 and Mohammed Ali's missions to France in 1826. These ideas were welcomed because of the tolerant policies of Ibrahim Pasha (1789-1848) after he occupied the Levant in 1830. The immediate impact of the French Revolutionary ideas was not visible, but there was a long-range influence on liberal ideas and ideals of legal equality, as well as the notion of opposition to a tyrannical government. They brought such influential themes as constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, individual liberty, legal equality, and the sense of ethnic nationalism (Klaits and Haltzel, 2002: 57-140).

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[33] Arabic word meaning 'community'. It is commonly used to mean the collective community of Islamic people. In the Quran, *ummah* typically refers to a single group that shares common religious beliefs.

Arab independence and the *al-Nahda* shaped the formative years of the emerging

first Syrian republic (1930-1958). The *al-Nahda* began in the late 19th and early 20th

century in Egypt as a cultural renaissance, intellectual modernisation and reform.

It expanded to Syria, Lebanon and other Arab countries, and was welcomed by the

intellectuals who shared the same history and language among others. The origin

of the *al-Nahda* remains debatable. Some scholars link it to the cultural shock after

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, and the resulting reformations of subsequent rulers

such as Muhammad Ali. Others view it as an autogenetic, Western inspired reform

program, linked to the Ottoman organisations, and influenced by internal changes

in political economy and reformations in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon (Sheehi, 2004).

Jamal al-Din al-Afaghani (1839-1897) interacted and responded to the French

influence. He met with the French philosopher Joseph Ernest Renan (1823-1892)

and debated the compatibility between Islam and science. In a lecture in the

Sorbonne University on the future of Islam, al-Afaghani refuted Renan's claims on

incompatibility between Islam and science (Arar, 3013). Unlike Butrus al-Bustani,

he advocated an Islamic unity to face the increasing influence of Christian Europe,

and incorporated adherence to the faith with an anti-colonial doctrine as a ground

for pan-Islamic solidarity. He criticised the traditional religion, which he defined as

the type of religion after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, but at the same

time provided a modernist reinterpretation and redefinition of old interpretations

of Islam. He criticised tradition, and viewed it as dogma and corruption of the

version of Islam of his age that stifled Islamic debate and replaced the correct

practices of the faith. Al-Afaghani's ideas created a void in the social structure,

and urged Muslims to seek new interpretations of their own faith and re-examine their traditional dogma (Imarah, 1968).

Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) was largely influenced by al-Afaghani. His contribution to the *al-Nahda* was that the application of true Islam is the key to justice in society, which would fight injustice and colonialism. His ideas equally played an important role in the urge for a restatement of the Islamic principles, and reforming the perception and practice of Islam. He accused the traditional Islamic authorities of moral and intellectual corruption, and of being dogmatic in imposing a doctrine of Islam that contradicts the correct application of the true faith. By 'true Islam', he meant the original message of Muhammad with no interference of *hadiths* or the faulty interpretation of his followers. It is both rational and divinely inspired, and as practised by the ancient caliphs (Abduh, 1993).

Rifaa al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) is widely considered the father of the *al-Nahda*. In 1826, he was deployed by Muhammad Ali to study Western sciences in Paris and preach to Egyptian cadets training at the Paris Military School. With some criticism, he developed a very positive attitude towards the West and the French revolutionary principles. His views, which reflected al-Azhar University conservative Islamic teachings, changed on a number of matters. He became adherent of parliamentarianism and a supporter of women's education. After five years in France, he returned to Egypt and in 1834 he published *The Quintessence of Paris*, a book that summarised his views on the Western culture from an Egyptian perspective, and reflected his general embracement. He concluded that

the Muslim world had much to learn from Europe, but noted that the reform should be adapted to the Islamic culture and values (Tahtawi, 2011).

A contribution of Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1893) to the *al-Nahda* lies in articulating a formula for native progress that reflects a synthetic vision of the matrix of modernity within Ottoman Syria (Bishara, 2011: 57-78). He instilled Syrian nationalism and patriotism, and is widely considered the first Syrian nationalist and master of the *al-Nahda*. Like al-Tahtawi, al-Bustani was also influenced by the Western culture and the French Revolution, however he advocated a selective adoption of Western knowledge to evoke the Arabs' aptitude for cultural success. He forged an Arab nationalism by adopting and contextualising European political and social values and education while preserving a distinct nationalism and Arab identity (Tauber, 1993).

At the same time, al-Bustani was also influenced by the golden age of Islam under the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), and called the Arabs and Muslims to reclaim their cultural and civilisational heritage. He did not seek a model of reform based on religion, and called for the separation between religion and the state, the same separation that was the key to the European renaissance. As a reformer, he contributed to the intellectual melange between Christians and Muslims in a greater revolution of identity and culture for modernity. He advocated a move towards secular and national education, which was a revolution in Arab culture and a step towards the *al-Nahda*. His major contribution was the attempt to utilise the

European political and social values and education within the framework of a distinct Arab, national and patriotic identity (Sheehi, 1998: 87-99).

Muslim societies, however, were more receptive to the ideas of their Muslim fellow thinkers. For example, al-Bustani had been accused of spoiling the mentality of the *ummah* through advocating Westernisation and Christianisation in oriental and Muslim societies. He had been demonised for questioning the legitimacy of the Islamic conquerors and the Islamic law. He was criticised for depicting the warriors as thirsty for blood, and seeking carnal pleasure. His views were widely considered as a conspiracy against Islam and a distortion of its figures. Some critics were suspicious of al-Bustani because of his collaboration with the American and European missionaries, and accused him of plotting to spoil the Arab and the Islamic societies in the name of the *al-Nahda* (Baraki, 2010).

The views of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1854 or 1855-1902) contributed to the *al-Nahda,* and the conceptualisation of justice and freedom. It continued to inspire Islamic identity, pan-Arabism, which motivated the Arab nation to seek independence and sovereignty. He was influenced by the thought of al-Afaghani and Abduh, of pan-Islamic identity, which he developed into pan-Islamic Arabic solidarity. His theory of Arab exceptionalism, as the founding location of Islam, influenced Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) and other pan-Arab nationalists as well as Islamic reformists. He critiqued despotism and imperialism in general, and implicitly the Ottoman rule. He founded *Shahba*,[34] a journal that criticised tyranny,

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[34] Arabic word, another name of Aleppo.

dictatorship and despotism of his time, especially the new *wali*[35] of Aleppo, Jamil

Ibrahim Pasha, which is thought to be the cause behind his mysterious death (Abd

al-Kareem, 2013).

Al-Kawakibi was also influenced by Western thought and the French Revolution.

He argued that the Europeans advanced because they embraced modernity. After

analysing the ideas of Islamism and pan-Arabism against the interpretation of the

Quran and the s*unnah,* his book *The Mother of Cities: Mecca* emphasised the

importance of *ijtihad*,[36] and argued that *taqlid*[37] caused the Muslims to be stagnant

in religion and other forms of knowledge, and was ultimately the reason of the

downfall of Muslims. They did not seek new interpretations of the Quran and

hadiths, and relied on interpretations from centuries ago. They abandoned Islamic

values, disregarded science vis-à-vis superstitions, and did not keep up with

modernity (Imarah, 1975).

The influence of the French Revolution on al-Kawakibi appears in his advocacy of

the separation between religion and the state, and his perception of the caliph as

a spiritual guide with no political powers. The influence of Ibn Khaldun appears in

his view of religions as a source of authority (Akif Kayapinar, 2008: 375-407). He

argued, of all nations, the Arabs were the most suitable to be an authority in

religion. Unlike other Muslims, the Arabs were united with no racial or sectarian

separation (Haim, 1962: 27). *Mother of the Cities: Mecca* is a fictional dialogue of

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[35] Arabic word meaning 'governor'.
[36] Arabic word meaning 'independent thinking'.
[37] Arabic word meaning 'imitation'.

an Islamic conference held between representatives of different nations in the Islamic world to unify themselves under Arabism. The conference takes place in Mecca, which highlights its importance in the Islamic world, and the importance of *Quraysh*[38] in the rightful caliphate.

In *The Nature of Despotism*, al-Kawakibi offers a solution for despotism. First, the nation that does not feel the pain of despotism does not deserve freedom. A nation which is humiliated by a despotic system loses the sense of freedom and does not seek it. However, al-Kawkibi does not blame the nation because despotism is often supported by an alliance with a foreign power as well as financial and religious powers. Second, despotism is not resisted by violence but by gradualism. The only method to resist despotism is progress and learning. Despotism cannot be fought by popular ideas because they are changeable, and cannot be resisted by violence because it would trigger a civil conflict, which would be a natural result when the despotic regime becomes more oppressive. In such cases, the moderate and rational people should pull back and work on establishing justice through intellectual guidance. Third, it is necessary to prepare an alternative system to despotism. People should know the purpose behind changing the regime. The purpose should be specific and earn the support of the vast majority (Al-Ariss, 1998).

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[38] A mercantile Arab tribe that historically inhabited and controlled Mecca. Muhammad was born into the *Banu Hashim* clan of the *Quraysh* tribe.

Nasserism, Baathism and political Islam

Nasserism, Baathism and political Islam are among the most potent political ideologies that continued to have significant resonance throughout the Arab world to this day, and inform much of the public dialogue on politics in the Middle East. The conceptualisation of democracy was not mere philosophical or religious ideas of the past, but also a context of Nasserism, Baathism and political Islam. The relationship between Nasserism, Baathism and political Islam remains controversial. Nasserism and Baathism are interested in Islam, but have a secular approach to society, and have frequently suppressed political Islam in its many guises. They share espousing Arab sentiment, as well as anti-imperialist and broad socialist claims, and rejection of the multiparty system and sharing power (Krokowska, 2011).

Nasserism had a major influence on social and political life in the 1950s and 1960s through the Arab world, especially following the Suez Crisis of 1956. Spanning the domestic and international spheres, it combines elements of Arab socialism, republicanism, nationalism, anti-imperialism, developing world solidarity and international non-alignment. It was a pan-Arab nationalist ideology combined with a variably defined and implemented socialism that is distinguished from Eastern bloc or Western socialism. It opposes Western capitalism and communism, which it sees as incompatible with Arab traditions and the underpinnings of Arab society. Though mindful of the Islamic heritage of the Arab world, its secular ideology led to direct conflict with Islamic-orientated political movements, particularly the MB (Mansfield, 1973).

Western social scientists have largely perceived Nasserism as a modernisation movement, and an attempt to transform Egyptian traditional society through the modernisation of its economy and society, under new revolutionary leadership, aspiring to national prosperity (Podeh, 2004). Nasser governed through a strictly authoritarian one-party system, with extreme limits on any form of political dissent. Walid Khalidi[39] (1925) argues that Nasserism was able to attract support in the Arab world because it transferred, if only partially, to the Arab world itself, the centre of decisions concerning the future of that world. This change inspired self-confidence in the Arab community, after the *Nakba*[40] in 1948 (Laquere, 1958: 125).

Baathism presented itself as representing the Arab spirit against materialistic communism, and Arab history against dead reaction. It held ideological similarity and a favourable outlook on Nasserism, and was also influenced by Islam, the French Revolution, the *al-Nahda*, and by a number of prominent European philosophical and political figures, such as Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler (Devlin, 1975: 22). It is a secular ideology based on principles of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, Arab socialism as well as social progress (Devlin, 1991). It recasts the conservative Arab nationalist thoughts, but reflects a strong revolutionary and progressive tendency which developed alongside the decolonisation and context in the Middle East.

The appeal of socialism in Baathism was the idea of the control of resources by government in the interests of society, of state-ownership and direction of

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[39] Oxford University-educated Palestinian historian.
[40] The 1948 Palestinian exodus.

production, and equitable distribution of income through taxation and the provision of social services, which was specifically shown in the articulation of Marxist ideas in Arabic, and reinterpretation of Syria's history in Marxist terms. The increasing strength of socialism was partly a reflection of what was happening elsewhere in the world, such as the increasing strength of socialist and communist parties in Europe, the growing international influence of the USSR and its allies, the coming to power of the Communist Party in China, and the blend of nationalist and socialist ideas in the programmes of some of the parties which assumed power in the newly independent states of Asia (Hourani, 1991:402).

The centre of Baathism was the feature *baath*,[41] as the only way to develop an Arab society that is free and united. This renaissance would unite the Arab states and transform the Arab world politically, economically, intellectually and morally. Baathism promotes the development and creation of a unified Arab state through the leadership of a vanguard party over a progressive revolutionary government to resolve the illnesses of feudalism, sectarianism, regionalism, and intellectual reactionism. It supports socialist economics to a varying degree. It rejects the social democratic model of Europe, and interprets socialism as modernisation and development, rather than state socialism or economic equality. Its rejection of political pluralism, and support of the creation of a secular society by separating between Islam and the state, led to direct conflict with Islamic-orientated political movements, particularly the MB (Salem, 1994: 62-64).

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[41] Arabic word meaning 'renaissance'.

Michel Aflaq (1910-1989), whose ideas played a significant role in the development of Baathism, was influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). He argued that the Arab nation could be freed from backwardness and tardiness through moral and spiritual attempts, not religious and spiritual. Unlike the Marxists, he identified the Arab nation as a group of individuals, not classes, and identified the Arab identity as simply to be aware of being an Arab. He approached social justice throughout internal freedom of Arab humans as opposed to external freedom from the occupation, the real way for Arabs to restore their natural role in human civilisation and international politics. Aflaq's individual's freedom was criticised as being utopian, and his Arab socialism was criticised as a premature substitute of the communist approach to class conflict (Torrey, 1969).

The Baath adoption of the principle of parliamentary democratic constitutional state was not void of elitism, similar to the totalitarian parties in Europe that the rights and freedoms of the individuals are subject to the higher interest of the Arab nation under the leadership of the avant-garde party that embodies the will of the Arab nation (Olson, 1982). It was contradictory on ethnicity. Aflaq declined nationalism if built on race or ethnicity, and subordinated them to social unity that fuses all race and sect differences, but on the other hand, he praised the Arab race and considered mixing with other races as the reason behind the Arab moral and national deterioration. His understanding of a nation as one unity that fuses ethnic minorities was comparable to Kemalism's attitude towards the Kurds in Turkey (Ayturk, 2011: 308-335).

Aflaq argued against racism, and argued that Arab nationalism is not pro the serenity of the Arab race nor Chauvinism. It is a progressive nationalism that rejects sectarianism, tribalism and the hegemony of the feudal lords (Devlin, 1991: 1396-1407). He called for a French Revolution enlightenment model, and Western supreme values. Being Christian, Aflaq had to reconcile between Arab nationalism and intercontinental Islamic religion. He was challenged for claiming that Islam was the eternal message of the Arab nation while Muhammad was sent to all nations. He hypothesised that Islam is an Arab religion, with an Arabic text, and a response to the Arab needs and values. It sparked the Arabs to conquer the world, and flourish civilisations that reached Spain, China and Algeria. He synthesised that the Arab Christians are not alienated from the Islamic civilisation. They belong to it and identify themselves with it (Aflaq, 1963).

Nasserism and Baathism had a complex relation with Islam. Both were interested in leading the Islamic *ummah,* but at the same time wished to maintain separation between religion and the state, leading to a conflict with the political Islamists on the type of regime to manage political power. A study by Morroe Berger found no serious opposition between Islam and secular ideologies such as Nasserism and Baathism. The attitude of Nasserism and Baathism towards Islam was an attempt to buttress nationalism, socialism and one party rule (Berger, 1970: 61). Undermining the Islamic ideas, values and traditions in favour of secular schemes was to manage political power and the challenge of political Islam, which in turn led to significant political, economic and social transformations (Ajami, 1974: 41).

Political Islam[42] denotes an interpretation of Islam as a source of political identity and action, and a transformation of state and society according to Islamic principles as a source of concepts. It is a political ideology rather than a religious or theological construct. Adherents of political Islam believe that Islam is a body of faith that has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion. The diversity of the Muslim world, its socioeconomic characteristics, cultures, political systems and trajectories of intellectual development created a specific context and a unique definition of political Islam which was the result of the interpretation of religious precepts and local culture, including political culture within which it operates (Ayoob, 2004: 1; Zeghal, 1998).

Islamic politics in the Middle East have become more prominent, and among the most powerful dynamics of the 21st century. It became more heavily involved in democratic politics following the Arab Spring in 2010. According to Robin Wright,[43] Islamist movements have altered the Middle East more than any trend since the modern states gained independence, redefining politics and even borders. The idioms available to the Islamists and the institutions could pass a political message with religious colouring, and change the sermon into a manifesto. The strategies of post-colonial regimes for dealing with political Islam through co-optation, competition or suppression were not fully effective. The attempt to co-opt with Islamists only provided them with greater political and media opportunities. The

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[42] It is commonly used interchangeably with Islamism which refers to diverse forms of social and political activism advocating that public and political life should be guided by Islamic principles.
[43] American foreign affairs analyst, journalist and author.

attempt to compete with them on their own terms by projecting the regime as equally committed to Islam, as Anwar Sadat (1918-1981) did in Egypt, surrendered the rhetorical ground to Islamists' elements that vigorously criticised the rulers for not living up to their own words. The attempt to suppress them by coercion forced them underground and led to violent acts against the regime and its symbols and supporters (Wright, 2015; Ayoob, 2004: 3).

The most striking example of the political power of a religious leader was that of Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah (1844-1885). He was a Nubian religious leader of the Samaniyya order who ended the Egyptian rule in Sudan in the 1880s. He drew some of his strength from opposition to the foreign governors. He was regarded by his followers as the *Mahdi;*[44] the one guided by God to restore the reign of justice in the world. His movement spread quickly in a country where government control was limited, the towns were small and the Islam of the *ulama* was too weak to counterbalance the influence of a rural teacher. He was able to establish a state based upon the teachings of Islam, as interpreted by him, and modelled upon the ideal community of Muhammad and his companions. This state was carried on by his *Khalifa*[45] after his death, and only ended by the Anglo-Egyptian occupation in 1896 (Hourani, 1991: 313).

The era of the 1970s saw a revival of political Islam in the Middle East, and the religion became a compelling force in politics. As Karl Marx represented, religion

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[44] Arabic word meaning 'the guided one'. An eschatological redeemer of Islam, who according to some Islamic traditions, will appear and rule before the Day of Judgement and rid the world of evil.
[45] Arabic word meaning 'successor'. It commonly refers to the leader of a Caliphate.

is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation (McLellan, 1977). The experience of occupation and conflict in many Middle Eastern countries had a profound effect on the emergence of political Islam. Many political and social bodies sought an identity that was essentially in opposition to their political regime. A considerable part of the Muslim population renounced nationalism as a Western-inspired ideology which clashes with their traditional and religious values. They insisted that their identity and nationality are their religion, and sought an alternative in Islam in the hope of providing dignity, power, protection, stability and democracy through a system for the individual, state and society (Soherwordi, 2013: 21; Hanif, 2006: 12).

Political Islam altered the conceptualisation of democracy, and shaped the responses of the regimes. Islamic groups challenged the Sadat regime in Egypt, and succeeded in assassinating him in October 1981. The MB handicapped Nasser in establishing his own symbols (Feit, 1973: 258). What made the Islamic alternative especially credible was the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. That event gave a great moral boost to advocates of the Islamic vision in several Arab countries, who then posed a serious challenge to the entrenched populist regimes in Syria, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen and Sudan. Only in Sudan did the political Islam manage to seize power, through a military coup in 1989. However, the bloodshed during the Islamists' challenge to regimes in Algeria and Egypt, and the harsh and backward implementation of the Islamic law by the Islamic Salvation Front in Sudan and the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, disillusioned the

advocates of an Islamic rule. Even in Iran, the Islamic version was discredited by a reign of terror at home (Ibrahim, 2004: 42-43).

Such movements gave fuel to the fear of the revolt of Islam. Military regimes perceived political Islam as a fundamental threat, which they encountered through nationalist ideologies to legitimise their rule and govern the societies. Despite its retreat, free elections in the Middle East reflected a popular tendency to vote for Islamist parties. In 2006, Hamas[46] won a popularity of 76 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian legislative elections (BBC, 2006). In the wake of the 2011 Tunisian revolution and the collapse of the government of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the Ennahda Movement won a plurality of 37% of the popular vote and formed a government (the Guardian, 2011). In 2012, Mohamed Morsi (1951-2019) won a plurality of 51.7% of the popular vote and was elected President of Egypt (France 24, 2012).

In response to political Islam, military regimes attempted to reinforce the existing culture created by Islam and to transform it into what Pye and Verba (1963) called political culture, through creating a sense of community, cultural loyalty and political integration (Ismael, 1968: 49). To maintain their rule, the military, along with their administrative and financial allies in the government, do more than organising people. They create institutions that assure active participation of the masses, without having to use the coercive power of the state. In order to get themselves legitimised and valued, they need to select a number of people and

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[46] A Palestinian Sunni-Islamist organisation founded in 1987.

entities to work with them closely and actively for what they define as national ends, through what they define as democratic means to manage political power (Feit, 1973: 251). The selection criteria of the elite surrounding the ruler were based on the particularity, the conditions, and the context in each country with regard to religion, sect, tribe or financial capabilities.

Plutocracy

The ideologies in the Arab world have displayed signs of transformations over the past few decades in response to the context. In some cases, one regime gave way to another; in others, the existing regime altered its own policies and practices. The first transformation was the retreat of the socialist pan-Arabism of Nasser after his military defeat in 1967. In Sudan, Jaafar Numairy (1930-2009) shifted rapidly from socialism to capitalism to Islamic radicalism. Libya went through several phases before capitulating over contested issues of terrorism and WMDs. In Iraq, the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein fell at the hands of an American-led coalition in 2003 (Ibrahim, 2004: 43-44). The changing context and regime transformation spurred political, economic and social changes, and encouraged people to reclaim liberal values and democratic ideas.

The notion of plutocracy (Chomsky, 2013; Herbert, 1998) developed in response to influence by the context. External and internal factors triggered the start of political transformation. As one phase ended and left its legacy, another began. Certain social formations, classes, occupations and ethnic groups declined, and new ones arose. During the past two centuries, Syria has gone through a sequence of six

overlapping political phases: early liberal, colonial, middle liberal, populist radical, Islamic and neo-liberal. The landed bourgeoisie championed the first liberal age, and the middle class the second. The lower middle class dominated the populist radical phase, and the lower middle class has sustained the current Islamic movement. A coalition of Western-educated professionals and business leaders was pushing for the return of liberalism (Ibrahim, 2004: 36).

The notion of plutocracy was adjusted and constructed in relation to interaction between Islam and democracy. Like democracy, when plutocracy is put into an Islamic context it is perceived differently. It takes its meaning not only as a standalone economic control, but also of its control of institution in the context of democracy. The advent of Islam entirely transformed the region and remains one of the longest surviving and most influential traditions in this part of the world. It has had an influential and staying power in the Arab world and neighbouring Muslim countries. It is not only a religion, but also a complete and detailed code that covers all aspects of everyday life, and is largely considered a binding constitution for Muslims (Ismael, 1968; Abbasi, 2012: 8).

In practice, plutocracy and democracy define themselves against each other. Unlike democracy, plutocracy is not rooted in an established political philosophy. The operative definition of plutocracy in this thesis is a government by the wealthy, a country or society governed by the wealthy, an elite or ruling class of people whose power derives from their wealth. It is a tiny group, just one-quarter of 1 per cent of the population, and it is not representative of the rest of the nation, but its

money buys plenty of access (Khalid, 2016; Chomsky, 2013; Stiglitz, 2011; Herbert, 1998). It is a form of capitalism in which the society is ruled and controlled by a small minority of the wealthy. It is the coordinated rule of moneyed interests, as the power of inequalities in wealth to undermine equality of opportunity with regard to politics and education. Plutocrats, by definition, ignore their social responsibilities, and use their power to serve their own purposes. Thereby, they increase poverty, nurture class conflict and corrupt societies with greed and hedonism (Viereck, 2006). Plutocracy is neutralised if similarly talented and motivated citizens can expect to have roughly equal prospects of engaging in government, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances (Green, 2015: 1).

John Rawls[47] (1921-2002) maintains that a well-ordered liberal democratic regime would entirely neutralise plutocracy with respect to the political opportunities afforded to its citizens. Such a regime will guarantee a fair value of political liberties, which ensures that citizens similarly gifted and motivated have roughly an equal chance of influencing the government's policy and of attaining positions of authority irrespective of their economic and social class (Rawls, 2001: 44). Rawls re-emphasises his theory insisting that all citizens, whatever their economic or social position, must be sufficiently equal in the sense that all have a fair opportunity to hold public office and to affect the outcome of elections (Rawls, 2001: 149). All citizens, whatever their social position, may be assured a fair opportunity to exert political influence (Rawls, 2001: 177). He provides little account of the institutions to institute a fair value of political liberties, nonetheless

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[47] American moral and political philosopher in liberal tradition.

he emphasises two key reforms: campaign finance legislation and other uses of electoral law to reduce the impact of private money in politics (Rawls, 2005: 358).

Subsequent liberal thinkers echoed the Rawlsian paradigm especially in respect of equality of political opportunity (Freeman, 2007: 107). The luck-egalitarian account of justice of Gerald Cohen[48] (1941-2009) affiliates him with Rawls' attitude of generating a society free of plutocracy. Cohen agrees with Rawls' denial of plutocracy as a permanent problem in a liberal democratic society, nonetheless, he disagrees with Rawls that ensuring the people's opportunities to hold office and exercise political influence are substantially independent of whether their socio-economic position requires substantially equal material holdings. Cohen argues that the American experience shows that a Rawlsian model of election regulation can produce political democracy under a wide inequality of income and wealth (Cohen, 2009: 385).

Like Rawls, the goal of Ronald Dworkin[49] (1931-2013) was to neutralise the effects of wealth inequality on politics, while he accepted that inequality of political influence might continue to result from non-economic factors, such as the talent and commitment individuals bring to politics (Dworkin, 2006). For Dworkin, a justly organised distribution of resources in a liberal democratic regime involves a society insuring all its citizens against various forms of misfortune, such as poverty, disease and unemployment, as well as campaign finance legislation. He argued that a great deal of the inequality in political influence of our own time would be

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[48] Professor of jurisprudence in University College London.
[49] Professor of jurisprudence in University College London.

eliminated through the reduction of both economic inequality and the political influence stemming from such inequality (Dworkin, 2000: 199). The ultimate impact of his proposed reform, he claimed, is not to fully neutralise the role of wealth in relation to political opportunity, but to prevent the super-rich from monopolising politics altogether. Citizen equality is destroyed when only the rich are players in the political contest (Dworkin, 2000: 230).

Philip Pettit[50] (1945-) argued that justice requires that citizens have sufficient resources so as to possess the basic capabilities for functioning in society and to escape avoidable forms of domination such as being exploited or manipulated or intimidated by others. He claimed that such standards might require the substantial reduction of certain material inequalities (Pettit, 1997: 10). He perceived that to achieve the ideal of equality of political opportunity, citizens of a legitimate state have to enjoy equal access to a system of popular influence, which he defined as an opportunity for participation in that system with equal ease to each citizen (Pettit, 2012: 70-169). Jeffrey Edward Green[51] (1974-) argued that the appeal of Pettit to equality of political opportunity seems empty because it does not reflect on the way socio-economic inequality above and beyond a threshold of non-domination shapes unequal opportunities for political influence. In conclusion, liberals manifest a blind eye to the problem of plutocracy for the fact that even in a well-ordered liberal democratic society, fair equality of opportunity cannot be fully achieved for children in education, nor citizens in politics (Green, 2015: 4).

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[50] Professor of philosophy at the Australian National University.
[51] Associate professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Some modern historians such as Noam Chomsky[52] (1928-) argue that one modern formal example of a plutocracy is the modern day US for at least part of the Gilded Age (1860s-1896) and the Progressive Era periods (1890s-1920s) between the end of the Civil War (1861-1865) until the beginning of the Great Depression (1929-1939). President Theodore Roosevelt became known as the trust-buster for his aggressive use of the US antitrust law, through which he managed to break up such major combinations as the largest railroad and Standard Oil, the largest oil company (Schweikart, 2009). David Burton[53] (1925-2016) noted that what was needed for people was a real democracy, and that of all forms of tyranny, the least attractive and most vulgar is tyranny of mere wealth, the tyranny of a plutocracy (Burton, 1997: 104).

The Sherman Antitrust Act[54] had been enacted in 1890, with large industries reaching monopolistic or near-monopolistic levels of market concentration and financial capital increasingly integrating corporations. A handful of very wealthy heads of large corporations began to exert increasing influence over industry, public opinion and politics after the Civil War. Money was the mortar of this edifice, with ideological differences among politicians fading and the political realm becoming a mere branch in a still larger, integrated business. The state, which through the party formally sold favours to the large corporations, became one of their departments (Bowman, 1996).

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[52] American historian, philosopher and political activist.
[53] Professor of history at Cabrini College and Georgetown University.
[54] An act to protect trade and commerce against unlawful restraints and monopolies.

Paul Krugman [55] (1953-) argues that three factors explain the takeover of plutocracy. At that time, the poorest quarter of American residents such as African-Americans and non-naturalised immigrants were ineligible to vote. The wealthy funded the campaigns of politicians they preferred, and vote buying was feasible, easy and widespread, as were other forms of electoral fraud such as ballot-box stuffing and intimidation of the other party's voters (Krugman, 2009: 21-26). In 1913, the US instituted progressive taxation, but the elites used their increasing political power to lower their taxes, and employed what Jeffrey Winters[56] (1960) calls 'the income defence industry' to greatly reduce their tax (Khan, 2012). Chrystia Freeland[57] (1968) argues that what explains the present trend towards plutocracy is that the rich feel that their interests are shared by society (Freeland, 2012).

Bob Herbert[58] (1945-) referred to modern US plutocrats as homogenous donor class, and defined the class as a tiny group, just one-quarter of 1 per cent of the population, and it is not representative of the rest of the nation, but its money buys plenty of access (Herbert, 1998). Kevin Phillips noted the US as a plutocracy in which there is a fusion of money and government (Phillips, 2004). Joseph Stiglitz[59] (1943-) noted that the US is increasingly ruled by the wealthiest, and identified plutocracy as 'of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%'. In response to the Arab Spring, he

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[55] American economist, and professor of economics at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York.
[56] American political scientist at Northwestern University, specialised in the study of oligarchy.
[57] Canadian politician. She was appointed Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2017.
[58] American journalist, and op-ed columnist who wrote for the New York Times.
[59] American economist and a professor at Columbia University. He is a recipient of the Noble Memorial Prize in economic science and the John Bates Clark Medal.

noted that 1 per cent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income, an inequality even the wealthy will come to regret (Stiglitz, 2011).

Conclusion

The notion of plutocracy was constructed through a specific political and cultural context, and understanding of the relationship between Islam and democracy. A juxtaposition amongst multiple notions of the Arab and the Islamic thought on democracy, the *al-Nahda,* Nasserism and Baathism and their interaction with Islam as a religion, culture and tradition, contributed to people's conceptions of democracy, and to the development of plutocracy as a type of regime to manage political power and calls for greater democracy. Unlike democracy, plutocracy is not rooted in an established political philosophy. Plutocracy is defined as a government by the wealthy, a country or society governed by the wealthy, an elite or ruling class of people whose power derives from their wealth. The following chapter critically reviews, traces and explains the ways in which the socio-political dynamics of Hafez al-Assad's era established the inheritance of Bashar al-Assad in terms of the regime's shape and its plutocratic tendencies.

IV.   Chapter Three: Historical Analysis

Introduction

This chapter critically reviews, traces and explains the ways in which the socio-political dynamics of Hafez al-Assad's era established the inheritance of Bashar al-Assad in terms of the regime's shape and its plutocratic tendencies. It identifies

the social and political context within which it developed, applied or was challenged between 1970-2000. It claims the existence of informal business networks linking state powers with business communities since the 1970s, long before official economic liberalisation (Perthes, 2004: 99). A small elite group of the wealthy emerged in response to social and political interaction, and governed the society through their wealth, for their own benefit and the benefit of the regime (Makhlouf, 2016).

Plutocracy emerged since the 1970s in response to internal and external conditions. The external context was influenced by the Arab Israeli conflict, the 1967 war with Israel when Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) was the minister of defence and other changes such as Muammar al-Gathafi (1942-2011) of Libya's rise to power in 1969. The political structure was influenced by the religious, ethnic and lingual diversity.[60] The key marker of plutocracy was the rule by a small elite of the wealthy which tended to have specific economic interests, that were tied to institutions through business networks of connections, the Baath Party, Alawism, and institutions that were to serve this elite rather than people (Fadil, 1997).

Social and political context from 1946-1963

These years of political stress were also a time when the society was changing rapidly. The social and political context played a large part in the modern sector of the economy, which had shrunk as political conditions changed and economic privileges were whittled away. The growth of population and its pressure upon the

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[60] Revise appendix F.

means of subsistence were not to be observed, and were beginning to be recognised as a source of problems of many kinds. The result of such rapid increase was that the age-distribution of the people changed. A change of more general significance was the movement of population away from the land. This came about mainly as a result of the increase of the rural population above the capacity of the land to support it, but in some places it was caused also by changes in agricultural techniques (Hourani, 1991).

For peasants who could not survive in the villages, the centres of power and trade had a positive attraction. They could hope for work in the growing industrial and service sectors of the economy, and for a higher standard of living and better opportunities for the education of their children. Because of these internal migrations, the rural society was changing into a society where a large and growing part of the population was concentrated in a few large cities. If the growing population were to be fed, and living standards improved, more would need to be produced. This need gave a new urgency to the idea of economic growth, which attracted government for other reasons as well. It was a possible way of creating a common interest between the ruler and the ruled, and a way of achieving the strength and self-sufficiency to be stable and independent (Hourani, 1991).

The rapid development of industry seemed more urgent than the expansion of agriculture. The government gave attention to creating the infrastructure without which industry could not grow, such as roads, railways, ports, telecommunications and hydroelectric power. Investment by the government, and to a lesser extent by

private individuals, led to some expansion of industry. For the most part it was consumer industry: food-processing, building materials, and textiles, particularly so that Syria had its own supply materials. The accumulation of national capital for investment was not sufficient for the national needs, and growth depended on investment and aid from abroad from countries whose polices were in harmony such as the USSR, whose loans were being made by the end of the 1950s (Hourani, 1991).

With the coming of independence, indigenous merchants and landowners were able to take a large part of the profits of economic growth. They were able to use their access to the government in order to obtain a larger share of the import-export trade. Even for some trade which had been in the hands of foreign firms and banks, some very large companies, working in close collaboration with politicians, played an important role. Most of the new industries were in local hands, because of a certain accumulation of capital by merchants and landowners, but also because of the need for young industries to have access to the government. Collaboration existed between indigenous and foreign capitalists (Hourani, 1991).

The power of the landowners increased, as the expansion of agriculture was primarily in the interest of those who owned or controlled land, and in particular of large landowners who had access to credit from banks and mortgage companies and could accumulate capital for investment. They were able to obtain advantages in irrigation and to keep the tax-system favourable to them. Because of their accumulated capital and access to credit they were able to buy land when it

became available, and their control of the best land made it possible to impose high rents on the tenants who cultivated most of it. The sense of injustice was strong among the cultivators, and the need for a reform of land-tenure was rising (Hourani, 1991).

The emergence of the political parties with different socialist, national, liberal or religious trends was influenced by the social, political and economic structure (Allouni, 1959: 64-76). They were influenced by socialism, communism and fascism through Syrian alumni and scholars returning from Europe with Marxist, Leninist, and Gramscian ideologies (Galvani, 1974: 3-16). Parties expressed a complex national movement, resulting from a cultural renaissance in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and gradually controlled the Syrian politics, which marked a transition from the traditional charismatic leadership. Most of the founders of these secular parties were Christians because of the influence of the French mandate and the *al-Nahda*. They were accused of Westernisation and Christianisation of the society. The MB emerged in response to challenge the secular approach, which marked the beginning of an ideological competition and confrontation (Pierret, 2014).

The emergence of the Baath party in 1947 was an outstanding phenomenon in political life (Aflaq, 1963). It gained increasing popularity among the minorities, and was closer to them in ideology than the other parties. The number of the Baath Party affiliates and branches competed with the two prevailing traditional parties: the Communist and the National Syrian, and challenged the monopoly of the MB

in Damascus and Aleppo (Roberts, 1987). The Baath Party was criticised for its policies on increasing the number of its affiliates randomly. It launched an affiliation campaign among the peasants, students, pensioners and sacked officers and their extended circles, and offered them various privileges in return for their affiliation (Anderson, 2016).

The leading political elite adopted the French Revolution democratic model and attained political stability and a multi-party system, striking the balance between the traditional Sunni families in Damascus and Aleppo, and availing more parliamentary and governmental representation of religious and ethnic minorities. The concept of minority became fundamental to the national understanding of Syria's politics and society as objective reality of the past and present (White, 2011). The French Revolution model created traditional leaders who were able to make cross-sectarian political alliances. However, the development of the model was based on the political and economic efficiency of the Sunni's overwhelming majority, in addition to other traditional Sunni-led Arab or Islamic parties and movements. Meanwhile, the minorities were attracted to Western-style ideological parties, qualifying Alawi, Druze, Ismaili and Christian candidates, and recovering from a societal alienation (Hitti, 1959).

The Sunni elite maintained that a democratic multiparty regime would attain political stability and strike the balance between Sunni traditional families in Damascus and Aleppo (Al-Taqi, 2012). It would allow a fair representation of religious and ethnic minorities in the parliament and the government. This type of

regime would allow traditional leaders to make cross-sectarian political alliances.

Syria enjoyed a moderate democratic regime and a free economy, with a promising 1950 constitution void of Islam as the state religion, because of religious diversity, while personal identifications dropped the discriminatory religion or sect, which was promising of a democratic life (Anderson, 1955: 34-49; Ziadeh, 2013). The constitution noted Syria as a part of the Arab nation, and aspired for a unified Arab state (Middle East Journal, 1953). Other leftist reformists in the parliament proposed a 28-article human rights charter, which was annexed to the constitution. It included the right of expression, newspapers, media, assembly, establishment of parties and organisations, work, free education and social security. The constitution considered the state as a social responsibility towards people (Deeb, 2012).

Politicians and the military exchanged accusations over the responsibility for the 1948 Palestinian exodus, which widened the gap between people, the political elite and the minorities in the army. The political context encouraged Husni al-Zaim (1897-1949), the general chief of staff and former affiliate of the Special Forces in the French army, to oust and exile the legitimate president. He dismantled the parliament and declared a military rule, ending the three-year old democratic experience (Carleton, 1950: 1-11). The coup was the first ever in Syria and the second in the Arab world since independence. It marked the emergence of militarism, and was the first in a series of 20 military coups, ending with Hafez al-

Assad in 1970. Fares al-Khouri[61] (1877-1962) described the coup as the greatest disaster ever, and noted that al-Zaim opened a door that will not be closed again (Orient, 2016).

The legitimacy, aim and mechanism of uniting with Egypt (1958-1961) remained controversial. The Baath Party affiliates rushed into a union from a utilitarian perspective to serve as Abdel Nasser's tool of ruling Syria. They viewed that such a union would stop the increasing hegemony of communism and of Khalid al-Azm (1903-1965). The union would not have been possible through democratic means because it did not have a majority. On 12 January 1958, a military delegation of 14 members, headed by the General Chief of Staff, Afif al-Bizri (1914-1994), visited Cairo in secret to discuss the prospects of a joint military leadership. The delegation exceeded his mandate and pushed for a political union. The government delegated Salah al-Din al-Bitar, the foreign minister, to exchange views with Abdel Nasser on union. Al-Bitar joined the military delegation and called for a union with no mandate from the government (Orient on YouTube, 2017).

The adverse economic circumstances faced by the UAR were of a great importance. The year 1957 had been of bumper crops and general prosperity throughout Syria. Import and currency restrictions were few. In 1958, however, Syria experienced the first of three successive years of severe drought. Grain

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[61] A Syrian nationalist statesman, prime minister, speaker of parliament, and godfather of modern Syrian politics. His electoral popularity was due to his staunch secularist and nationalist polices. He was resolutely against pan-Arabism and union between Syria and Egypt. In 1916, he joined the Great Arab Revolt, launched by Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca. In 1918, he created a preliminary government with a group of notables in Damascus. He held the position of minister of finance until King Faisal was dethroned and the French colonial forces imposed their mandate on Syria in July 1920 (Khoury, 1987).

surpluses had totalled between 600.000 and 800.000 tons in previous years. Drought caused losses and reduced the national income by one third. There was a similar reduction in other revenues such as oil which was largely because of oil stoppage resulting from the Suez crisis. Syrian foreign exchange reserves were further depleted by the fact that Syrian merchants had doubled their imports because of their expectations that restrictions would be imposed following the merger. Other factors were of equal importance. Foremost among these were factors relating to administration, coordination and economic policy (Palmer, 1966).

In 1958, Abdel Nasser introduced the first comprehensive land reform program under the banner of Arab socialism, which was enacted in the Agrarian Reform Law 161/1958. According to this law no person was allowed to own more than 80 hectares of irrigated land and 300 hectares of rainfed land. About 1.37 million hectares were to be expropriated. Landowners were to be compensated in full for expropriated land over a period of 40 years by means of negotiable bonds at 1.5 per cent interest. The number of the beneficiaries from the program was estimated at 750.000 persons in 1958 which involved about 150.000 families representing 17% of the population or 27% of the rural population. Expropriated land was to be distributed to landless peasants in plots not exceeding eight hectares of irrigated land and 30 hectares of non-irrigated land. On the other hand, the law stipulated the limits of the landlords' share of the crop according to the nature of the land. It further prohibited life contracts and required written leases and curtailed the landlords' right to cancellation. Right from the start, the land reform program

encountered serious difficulties. The first was the severe three-year drought which reduced Syria's agricultural output to less than half the 1957 level and rural income to 60% of that of 1957. The second was that the land reform program was copied from the Egyptian law without taking into consideration the fact that Syria's agriculture is extensive and Egypt's is intensive. For example, the law only distinguished between two land categories: irrigated and non-irrigated. However, there were differences in value of land irrigated by pump and by flow; between fertile land and pasture; between land in zones of maximum rainfall and arid or semi-arid land (Keilany, 1980).

Another set of reforms gave a severe blow to the existing structure of the urban economy and the urban merchant and entrepreneurial classes. Abdel Nasser fully nationalised banks, insurance companies, and three industrial firms and partially nationalised 24 industrial companies. No individual was allowed to own more than a specific worth of stock, and anything over it became state property. The government limited the number of people on the boards of directors of all companies, public or private, to seven members. The state prescribed salaries and allowances for directors. The laws allotted workers and staff 25% of the annual profits of all companies, which included 10% in cash bonuses, and 15% in housing and other benefits. Strict controls were imposed on foreign exchange and imports. In early 1961, the free currency market was abolished and since then all imports were made conditional upon licensing and the availability of foreign exchange (Ahsan, 1984).

These measures appeared so harsh that they constituted a reason that Syria break away. The union soon turned into an Egyptian hegemony over the Syrian sovereignty, wealth and markets. Abdel Nasser would not have agreed to a union had he not recognised its economic and political gains. Recognising the desperate need of the Baath Party for a union to stay in power, Abdel Nasser imposed his own conditions. First, the union is an unconditional fusion, not a federation. Second, to dissolve all political parties. Third, to prevent the armed forces from any political activity. Abdel Nasser's conditions aimed to thaw the Syrian identity within the union, and were humiliating (Sibai, 1975). In accordance with Abdel Nasser conditions, political parties were given a period of 12 months to dissolve themselves, ending on 13 March 1958. The Baath party leaders mistakenly believed that these conditions only applied to the other parties because the Baath Party was the godfather of the union (Viorst, 1995).

The Egyptian approach to a union with Syria was superficial (Deeb, 2012: 177). The Egyptians did not appreciate the religious and ethnic diversity, and the particular historical complexity. Abdel Nasser gave all important positions in the government to Egyptians, and marginalised the Syrians including the Baath Party leaders. His security apparatus controlled the Syrians' livings, which caused increasing sentiments of dissatisfaction. The union was about to leave no hope of democratic recovery. Under the union, the Egyptian constitution of 1954 was in power in Syria, which gave the president full power to nominate MPs and dissolve the parliament altogether. It gave him the power to declare the emergency laws without referring to the parliament, and left no room for sharing power. The union

turned Syria from an example of free media and political competition into a police state under the emergency law. People were monitored, and their mail and phones were bugged. Thousands of people were detained, tortured or killed. Shukri al-Quwatli, though a close friend of Abdel Nasser, complained about these practices claiming that they created a system of injustice, hegemony and suppression, in which a minority working in the security accused the majority of people with treason. Non-functional institutions and untrustworthy personnel ran the state (Deeb, 2012: 194). A cabinet reshuffle in 1960 gave unprecedented powers to Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj (1925-2013). He was nominated the president of the executive council in the 'Syrian province', the minister of the interior, and a state minister. He replaced Abdel Hakim Amer (1919-1967) to rule the province in the name of Abdel Nasser. The nomination of al-Sarraj was an admission by Abdel Nasser that repression was the last possible response to keep the union (Sibai, 1975).

The working class viewed Abdel Nasser's socialism and nationalisation as a means to deny labour's rights, which they had realised and practised since the French mandate when workers called for the legal recognition of the unions they had formed outside of the recognised associations, the right to strike, and restrictions on the hours of work, and managed to get the Syrian parliament to begin studying a draft labour (Couland, 1970: 228). Abdel Nasser's alternative was allegedly to engage the workers in administration and share with them the revenues. What lay behind was to combine the Syrian working class and unions with the Egyptian Arab Socialist Union as a means of controlling them. Law 91/1959 authorised the state

to organise the working class in unions as necessary; however, membership in unions required the approval of the Arab Socialist Union, which was already controlled by the intelligence (Deeb, 2012).

The traditional function of the labour unions in protecting workers had collapsed, and lost its role in deciding the minimal wages, compensations, sick leave and incentives. The rights of workers were eroding continually. After two years of the union, the right to strike was abolished, and the right against arbitrary firing was not in force. In principle, the labour law was an extract of both the Syrian and Egyptian labour laws, however it was a step backwards when compared to the Syrian law. It politicised the hierarchy to give the state more power over workers and unions, and to give the employers more power over the workers. It encouraged disciplinary punishment to deter workers (Hitti, 1959).

Three hundred labour union representatives held a conference in January 1960 and requested Abdel Nasser to restore unions' rights to strike, and to ban arbitrary firing. They requested a 10% raise of the minimal wage, the amendment of the labour law to become just and fair, and to stop the Arab Social Union from controlling the labour unions. These requests were met with repression and arrests. The executive committee of the General Federation of Labour Unions objected and resigned, which was a sign of the deterioration of the Baath Party co-operation with Abdel Nasser on labours affairs. Amer orchestrated a new executive committee loyal to the Arab Social Union, whose members represented the Nasser policies and disregarded labour's concerns (Deeb, 2012).

A military coup by Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi (1926-) on 28 September 1961 ended the union. Maamun al-Kuzbari (1914-1998) formed a government from the traditional Peoples' Party and National Party, along with independent businessmen and lawyers. Al-Nahlawi promised to abolish the emergency law, free media from censorship and restore the labourers' rights. Despite his promises not to interfere with the state institutions, he founded a national security council composed of the leader of the army and five ministers, headed by a president, to observe the state institutions. This council was the actual ruler, and did not differ from the union. It was a mixture of police state and some social programs. The council promised social reforms, the engagement of workers in administration, sharing the revenues, and the distribution of agrarian lands to farmers. Nonetheless, he retained the state of emergency, ban of political parties, ban of political activities, repression and censorship of media (Deeb, 2012: 212). A few months after al-Nahlawi's coup, the council announced the election of a new parliament, new president and a new constitution. The council anticipated any democratic practice by declining candidates their electoral campaigns, preventing the nominees of the parties from candidacy. It warned against criticism of the regime, except for what it identified as faithful criticism. Elections were made under the emergency laws, which refuted the allegations of the council that they were democratic (Beeri, 1982: 69-81).

The internal conditions of liberties, abolition of the emergency laws, and permitting the return of deported politicians facilitated the coup of the Baath Party on 8 March 1963 (Roberts, 1987). The Baath Party declined the government because of its attitude to the military. The MB declined because of the government's socialism

and infidel secularism. Khalid al-Azm opposed the interference of the military with politics. He rejected to have 'a chorus of officers around him like all other political and party leaders', which was very uncommon in the Arab world. He rejected dealing with any high-ranking military or favouring any authority except through the legal and constitutional channels. The government, however, was not in control of the security apparatus, and was unable to stop the military from interfering with politics.

Social and political context from 1963-1970

The Baath party coup against president Nazim al-Kudsi on 8 March[62] **1963**marked an outstanding social and political change. It resulted in the rise of the rural class and the decline of the traditional bourgeoisie. The controversial Emergency Law 51/1962 was placed into effect, and remained until 21 April 2011. Article 4 of the law allowed the martial ruler or his deputy to restrict the freedom of persons to meet, stay, move and travel at certain times, and to refer offenders to military courts. The Baath Party banned the gathering of more than five individuals. It detained hundreds of politicians, journalists, and intellectuals who had worked freely since the disunion in 1961. It closed all independent newspapers and combined between the state media and the Baath Party media. The AWU newspaper, *al-Mawqif al-Adabi*[63] changed from an institution that promotes literature into a state forum and censorship tool. Article 4(b) gave the state the right to ban and censor newspapers, books, radio, television, announcements and

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[62] The 8th of March is still an official holiday, and commemorated as a revolution by the labourers and peasants against feudalism and capitalism.

[63] Arabic word meaning 'literary standpoint'.

fine arts. It gave the state the right to confiscate or destroy any work deemed as threatening the state security, which was a vague sentence and open to controversial interpretation. Two years later, Decree 6/1965 was issued to punish with death anyone who opposes the regime in writing, saying or actions (Deeb, 2012: 244).

The new regime had new ideology and preconceived orientation towards economic polices aiming at establishing some sort of socialist system within an Arab framework. It introduced a harsher ceiling on maximum landownership on an individual basis that amounted to between 15-55 hectares of irrigated land per person, depending on the fertility of the land (Keilany, 1980). In urban economic sectors, the new regime appeared to be harsher. It re-nationalised the banks, leading to the drying up of bank credit and compelled industrial cutback. The nationalised sectors included the banks, insurance companies and nine mercantile companies. On 1 January 1965, a sweeping nationalisation program was adopted which altogether took 106 private firms. Nationalisation was extended throughout the early months of 1956 that covered oil-distributing companies, cotton-ginning companies, and about 70% of export and import trade (Ahsan, 1984).

The nature of economic growth, and of rapid urbanisation, led to a greater and more obvious polarisation of society than had previously existed. The beneficiaries of growth were in the first instance members of ruling elites, army officers, government officials of the higher ranks, technicians, businessmen engaged with construction, or having some connections with multinational enterprises. Other

segments of the population benefitted less or not at all. In the cities, there was a population of small employees, small traders and those giving services to the rich, and around them was a larger floating population of those employed in the 'informal sector', as itinerant vendors or casual workers, or not employed at all. In the countryside, medium-sized landowners, or large ones could cultivate their land profitably because they had access to credit, but the poor peasants could scarcely hope to improve their position (Hourani, 1991: 438).

The Baath policy of rural development was driven by several conflicting imperatives. When it came to power in 1963 it was committed to an agrarian reform which would create a socialist agricultural sector based on state-led development, state farms and peasant co-operatives. Its ability to deliver a more equitable and productive agrarian sector was a key to its legitimacy among its rural constituency. A major practical challenge was posed by land reform implementation which, in alienating landlords and investors who had hitherto been the source of production requisites and investment, left a gap which the state had to fill if production was to be sustained (Hinnebusch, 2011).

The Baath Party in theory was far from practice. Theoretically, it rejected sectarianism. However, the party leaders did not provide education to ideologise their affiliates and immunise them against sectarian and traditional loyalties. They did not adhere to the Baath Party principles as a reference in leading the society towards a substitution of traditional loyalties with national loyalty (Van Dam, 1979: 191-219). The society accepted some aspects of modernity, but the Baath Party

went too far towards secularism. It banned religion from political speeches, and restricted access to religious education. It nominated loyal preachers and monitored religious institutions (Farouk-Alli, 2014).

The attitude of the Baath Party towards the Kurds remained controversial (Lowe, 2006). Demographic statistics in the Al-Jazeera region in northern Syria in November 1962 considered a large number of Kurds as non-Syrians, who originally came from Iraq or Turkey. Consequently, they became unqualified to benefit from the agrarian reform and distribution of lands. However, it was also argued that they were Syrian but did not have identification cards because of poverty, illiteracy and the lack of documentation. The Baath Party affiliates were more sceptical of a Kurdish conspiracy of autonomy. They relocated them away from the international borders and their Iraqi and Turkish fellows, so that they could not claim a geographical territory for a state (Gunter, 2014).

The Baath Party sought to establish or penetrate the existing popular organisations to widen its popular base and deepen the concept of popular democracy (Peters, 2012). Popular organisations included the General Peasants Union, General Federation of Labour Unions, General Female Union, General Students' Union, and the Revolution Youth Organisation. Except for the General Federation of Labour Unions, which was innate in unions and labour movements, all other unions were new and did not have a popular base. They were run by the Baath leaders; programmed and used as a device to support the Baath Party on the popular level. Popular organisations played a role in monitoring the state

institutions and labourers. They joined particular international unions to bolster the Baath Party internationally (Deeb, 2012).

The survival of the Baath Party necessitated an in-depth review of the theoretical principals of the Baath Party vis-à-vis the split between the leaders and the popular base. The attitude of the traditional leaders, such as Aflaq and al-Bitar, towards Arabism, nationalism, secularism and reform was emotional. They aimed at a union between the Arabs, and were against Marxism and communism. The attitude of the base, represented by the rural youth, focused on socialism and was pro Marxism to solve the class conflict. Marxism meant that labourers and peasants were the avant-garde of the Arab revolution, and that the bourgeoisie were not qualified to decide the future of the Arab nation. Despite the split, the base adhered to the Baath Party because of its utopianism; however, its aim at a union between the Arabs remained inexplicable from a Marxist perspective (Deeb, 2012: 250).

The neo-Baath coup in 1966 marked an unprecedented change in the social and political structure. It brought a rural religious minority into power for the first time in the modern history of Syria, which was followed by important social, political, economic and demographic changes. The neo-Baath was unable to prove legitimacy through democratic actors, popular organisations and participation of parties. Alternatively, it built a class-based loyalty and business network of clientelism and corruption. Sectarianism, tribalism and regionalism were crucial to determine the dynamics of power, which resulted in sharp social differences,

inequality and absence of social justice (Van Dam, 1979). The struggle and split between classes crystallised as a result of the neo-Baath favourable attitude towards the poor classes, labourers, peasants, soldiers, students and women, which was to counter the feudal classes (Olson, 1982), and belief that the nationalist struggle against Western hegemony and towards Arab unity could not be pursued if the economy is controlled by private industrialists, merchants and landlords.

Nationalisation was a route to put an end to the outflow and break the feudal and capitalist hegemony exercised by the bourgeoisie. It was intended more to destroy the economic control of the Syrian traditional classes, and to end economic ties with the West. Nationalisation had brought 80-90% of large enterprises into the public sector. The government bureaucracies that ran the nationalised industry, and also the banks, insurance companies and much of big commerce, were staffed heavily with persons from the middle classes of the countryside. The workers within the industry found little change in their position. As in the agricultural sector, the significant change in industry, commerce and finance was the dispossession of the big capitalists as the control of the economy passed into the hands of the rural middle class. The neo-Baath was able to carry through the nationalisations over the active opposition of the various sectors of the old ruling class and of the urban bourgeoisie because of its control of the army. Its own social base remained the middle landowners and peasants of the countryside (Galvani, 1974).

The social and political conditions under the neo-Baath party were climaxing. The secular policies were provocative to the Sunni traditional society and the religious institution (Al-Maydani, 1967). A new transitional constitution in May 1969, the 7th since independence, identified the Baath party as avant-garde, and the leader of the state and society. The article on the right of gathering and protesting was substituted with the right to express an opinion within the law, which did not have any power under the emergency law. The new constitution marked the end of any political attempt, criticism or accountability. The radical ideology of the neo-Baath was sharpened by the military defeat with Israel in 1967, which led to more regional and international isolation. Syria's foreign relations with the Arab and the Islamic states deteriorated for sectarian reasons, and became limited to the USSR and the Eastern Bloc.

Social and political context from 1970-2000 and the emergence of plutocracy

The dynamics of power were structured in a system which emerged from the context (Stacher, 2011: 197-212). An elite group of the wealthy governed the society through their wealth, which gave them an unofficial official power beyond the positions they held. Plutocracy was not a political idea, however, in practice, the Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the al-Zuabis controlled the society for three decades through their wealth. Through a number of companies in oil, food processing and transportation, they controlled the economy and the market[64] directly through decision-making, and indirectly through controlling the stock

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[64] Timothy Mitchell defines the making of the economy and the market as objects of twentieth-century politics.

markets via their shares (Hinnebusch, 2015). They were connected to an informal engageable network, which linked state powers with business communities since the 1970s, long before the official economic liberalisation (Perthes, 2004: 99).

Baathism appealed strongly to the rural population in their rhetoric on class difference and clash among the social classes (Seale, 1988: 456; Maoz, 1993: 97-105; Gelvin, 2006: 19-29). This has been expressed in a much anthologised statement of an Alawite military officer in 1970, the same year that Hafez al-Assad came to power: 'Don't expect us to eliminate socialism in Syria; for the real meaning of such steps would be the transfer of all the political, financial, industrial, and commercial advantages to the towns, i.e. the members of the Sunni community. We, the Alawites⋯, will then again be the poor and the servants. We shall not abandon socialism, because it enables us to impoverish the townspeople and to equalise their standard of life to that of the villages.' (Beieri, cited in Olson, 1982: 179-180).

As state income from oil sales and aid declined, Hafez al-Assad developed ties with select members of the business community to achieve a modicum of economic growth. Reserving the right to reverse their inclusion paved the way for forms of economic agency that maintained the security of the regime but diminished the potential development of the state and the private sector (Haddad, 2012). Some capitalist families started to emerge as crony capitalists, linking the business class with the political class for their own benefit, which was at the same

time in the interest of the political elite, and became known as *abnaul sulta.*[65] Significant elements of the bourgeoisie were brought, or dragged, de facto and de jure, into a sort of coalition with the state as a result of Hafez al-Assad's selective liberalisation, which was directed by the desire to broaden his support base in the 1970s, and the need to improve the economic situation in general (Perthes, 1995).

When Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, he inherited an agrarian sector in stagnation. Unfinished corporatisation meant the state was failing to fill the gap. He therefore sought to placate landlords and investors and revive the private agricultural sector. Landlords were encouraged to invest in their reduced post-land reform holding. The vast state lands in the scarcely populated Jazira, on which the state lacked the resources to either resettle peasants or create state farms, were rented out to agrarian entrepreneurs. Thus, the bourgeoisie, which was formerly regarded as a hostile class, was being made a partner in agrarian development. In the meantime, the state was concentrating on organising the small peasant sector and reserve its investment for the newly reclaimed and irrigated lands in major hydraulic projects such as the Ghab and the Euphrates Basin. Agriculture would, thus, have dual private and socialist sectors (Hinnebusch, 2011).

Hafez al-Assad did not do much to change the existing agrarian structure except to allow some relaxations where possible to broaden his base of support. He did not change ceilings on landholding but allowed some de facto consolidation of land. In 1972, the average size of landholding was approximately 9.7 hectares. The

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[65] Arabic word meaning 'men of power'.

implementation of land reform has been made more favourable to landlords and Hafez al-Assad has returned some seized land to the former owners. Substantial changes, however, came about in the industrial and commercial sectors. By mid-1971, the private sector accounted for 25% of the industry. By the end of 1975, the large industrial concerns, water, electricity, the banks, the insurance companies, and essential parts of foreign trade were owned by the state. By the end of 1979, over 75% of the capital investment in industry was in the public sector (Ahsan, 1984).

Since the rise to power of Hafez al-Asad in 1970, the Syrian regime started a process of winning the favours and support of the private sector by implementing various economic liberalisation measures directly. This was accompanied with increased connection and collaboration between sectors of the predominantly Sunni urban business community. The private sector businessmen, who were once classified as an important threat to the economic and political control of the regime, progressively became a significant component of it and were increasingly integrated into its various institutions (Perthes 1992: 225). The state turned over implementation of much of its development program to foreign firms and local contractors, fuelling a rowing linkage between the state and private capital.

Favoured businessmen made fortunes on construction contracts. The channelling of massive external revenues through the state and to private businesses created growing opportunities for the elite. Besides, webs of shared interests in commissions grew upwards between high officials, politicians and business

interests. Since, business depended on the government, and businessmen needed patrons in the regime, fuelling the rise of mutual protection alliances between them and political patrons (Dawisha, 1988: 139-140). As political and military elites used their power to enrich themselves, and the private bourgeoisie sought opportunities to translate wealth into political influence, alliances were established and certain amalgamation between the state and private bourgeoisie began. The various alliances (business, political, and sometimes marriages) which developed between state elites and businessmen was generating a new bourgeoisie formation, partly official, partially service and commercial, in both public and private sectors (Hinnebusch, 2002). An interesting question is whether the formation of this class was intentional. Seale (1988: 457) maintains that Hafez al-Assad deliberately sought to give his regime a class underpinning the need for stability, and muting the former sharp antagonism between the state and the private bourgeoisie, which gave the regime a more secure power base. New and old elites had yet to be amalgamated into a new dominant class.

Bassam Haddad[66] argued that the public-private networks emerged as a result of Hafez al-Assad's security concerns. It was an attempt to seek alternative forms of incorporation, and both to moderate the radicalism of the Baath Party and to establish détente with the weakened but potentially destabilising traditional sectors. From the perspective of a quasi-socialist regime, a formal incorporation of the entire business community was politically risky and unstable. The legacy of

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[66] Director of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Program and Associate Professor at George Mason University.

state-business antagonism and mistrust which were already deep-seated in the early 1970s initially prevented Hafez al-Assad from dealing formally with the business community as a whole. Unable to discipline the private sector as a whole, he resorted to the creation of informal ties with particular members of the existing business community, some of whom acted as the unofficial partners of state elites. He informally brought parts of the private sector as crony-like state-business networks. The principal cornerstone of the regime was a moderate Baath Party, and replaced a politicised army with a massively refurbished security apparatus that constituted a strong backbone for public-private ties. Emerging state-business networks served as an alternative agency for capital accumulation, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an alternative support base during times of political crisis, particularly when the MB sought to undermine the authority of the regime. Over time, these informal webs of state-business ties formed and reformed rent-seeking networks that developed a life of their own as demonstrated by their impact on economic changes after 1986, as the regime attempted to handle a major economic crisis. This was even more evident after 1991, when these networks became the basis of the official institutional expression of the private sector (Haddad, 2012).

The state-business networks' sustenance was secured by substantial oil and strategic rents that the regime had been able to extract since 1973. It remains obscure how much of this revenue was incorporated into the yearly budget, however the regime disposed of this revenue in a manner that sustained its ability to make high-policy decisions independent of any other social forces. The key to

its decisional autonomy was its financing of the patronage around the public sector, particularly that which related to public-private networks. This source of external or rent income[67] was the principal reason the regime was able to maintain the public sector and public spending. The public sector served crucial political purposes for the regime, such as employment generation, benefits for the urban working classes and the families it employed, and the dominance of the largest sectors of the economy. The regime had hitherto refused any form of official privatisation of state-owned enterprises and repeatedly rejected proposals to downsize the public sector in any significant way, insisting on presenting it as the leading economic sector to be complemented by the private and mixed sectors (Hinnebusch, 1990; Heydemann, 2013).

The new economic elite comprised both private businessmen and state officials which introduced a private and public sector relationship, which was a relatively recent social phenomenon. It emerged with the acceleration of statist economic policies, particularly after the heavy inflow of capital from the GCC countries after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The new economic elite grew rapidly as a result of a number of factors involving the expansion of the state, public investments, semi-legal business ventures across Syria's borders, and exceptional domestic business deals which brought officials and private partners together in largely commercial ventures. The new private bourgeoisie was largely a creation of the regime, while the state bourgeoisie has been an outgrowth of statist policies and risk-averse regime strategies that emphasised capital accumulation within regime orbits.

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[67] Income that derives from ownership of natural resources or directly unproductive profit-seeking.

These strategies were to create a new economic elite in the image of the new regime in juxtaposition to a traditionally resilient urban Sunni bourgeoisie (Rahbek, 2005).

Amounting to no more than 1% of the population, the new economic elite had great powers. Its powers were not derived from the institutions that represented and supported private business, but rather from its access to the highest power centres in the regime and the positions that member of the state economic elite themselves held simultaneously in government, party, army and security. The most powerful segment of the state economic elite was drawn from the ranks of the top regime leadership, however not all these individuals had been in charge of an official position. Comprising of a few dozen individuals who controlled the commanding heights of the Syrian economy within and outside the public sector, this stratum was united by its direct relations with Hafez al-Assad and his family (Haddad, 2012).

State-business relations remained largely informal, with the exception of a few notorious cases that were visible and accessible, including the tourism mogul Uthman al-Aidi, the transportation mogul Saib Nahhas, and the informatics mogul Abdul Rahman al-Attar. Thought some cases were visible, the majority of businesses working with or in the shadow of the state and its personnel remained faceless during the 1970s and 1980s. Only the 1990s witnessed the emergence of relatively more visible relations between the regime and individuals in the private sector, usually through patronage relations with the Assad family, security,

parliament or chambers of commerce or industry. In the 1990s, the strategic situation was slightly different as the private sector actors acquired more legitimacy because of the growing state-business alliance. Business representatives were established parliament members and board members at various chambers, supported by political power and able to make policies at high level institutions connecting the state to business community. The business environment largely influenced the economics, politics and governance (Kienle, 1994).

For over three decades, Syria developed a bloated and inefficient public sector that provided a support base for the regime. Gradually, the government became the source of patronage to an emerging clientelist network in the military, bureaucracy, business community and other elements of society associated with the state apparatus (Lesch, 2013: 6). Low salaries, especially in senior positions, encouraged corruption, a brain drain, and an obsession with bonuses and allowances which depended on individual connections. Inflation, reducing the real salaries of senior ministry officials by 46% from 1974-1979 and further in the 1980s, was the major threat to the integrity of the public service (Hinnebusch, 2011).

Investment Law 10/1991 was the best example of laws that intended to promote investment. However, it was ill-prepared, orphan, and was accompanied by bureaucratic obstacles. It also had direct contradictions with existing laws, including ones that prohibited dealing with foreign currency, which pushed most potential investors away and attracted the economic and political elite who could

handle these complications and make the best out of the law for quick profits. It benefitted specific individuals and cliques through companies that were established without even meeting the requirement of being a productive investment. The largest new enterprises in industry or services that were reserved for the public sector or in new domains were dominated by the very same category of people who, through Investment Law 10/1991, monopolised these sectors or domains, enjoying a form of important or quality protection. Until the end of 1998, only 196 manufacturing projects were launched with a total capital of 24.5 billion Syrian pounds. These projects created only 8.180 jobs. The labour share of manufacturing was only 10%. These figures represent the failure of the law in promoting manufacturing and employment amid a lack of complementary basic changes in the overall investment climate and dynamics of power (Batatu, 1999; Dalilah, 2012).

Investment Law 10/1991 was a significant step towards legislations on economic reform and liberating some economic sectors from the public sector. However, the plutocracy voided it through corruption and manipulation of the public funds (Sadowski, 1987: 442-461). The plutocracy manipulated the law and monopolised the economic activities, which deprived people of interests. The accompanying bureaucratic obstacles of the law pushed most potential investors away and attracted the plutocracy and those with political connections and who were in search for quick profits. The keys to Law 10/1991 were handled by the Higher Council for Investments, a body that routinely submitted to politically-subsidised contracts (Haddad, 2012: 129).

In response to the growing influence of crony relations, the government started to reduce the quantity of goods and services subsidised, and increased the prices of various states of profit. The ways in which the government handled it had devastating long-term consequences in both social and economic terms. For example, raising up the price of formerly subsidised crops, especially wheat, in the 1990s caused the government to borrow from the central bank to cover the cost. Such borrowing served to increase inflation and impose an indirect tax on the Syrian population, which was then faced with higher prices. The raise up of prices was not accompanied by a proportional raise in salaries, forcing most Syrians to borrow, work more, or in most cases, reduce their already decreasing living standards. The general public was being taxed more and the products they purchased were subsidised less. This situation was caused primarily by keeping wages down while strengthening the mechanisms of tax collection, especially vis-à-vis the public sector and workers of lower income. Thus, the wealthy accumulated more untaxed wealth and the government cut subsidies, which left the middle and working classes exposed to strict tax collection measures and rampant inflation caused by central bank loans that finance deficit spending (Dalilah, 2012).

It is arguable that Mohammad Makhlouf was the marker of the emergence of plutocracy in the 1970s (Alarab, 2013). He became the central figure in Syria and surrounded Hafez al-Assad after he facilitated his marriage to Anisa Makhlouf, despite the objections in her family because of class differences. His reward traversed the financial benefit, and extended to politics. He became the leader of

the plutocracy. His role in governing Syria was beyond the official positions he held in a tobacco corporation and the Real Estate Bank. These positions were to give him an official legitimacy, and to help him establish a strong network of relations in the state institutions as well as in European and Russian banks, to which he transferred many of his funds (Makhlouf, 2016).

The case of Mohammad Makhlouf could be analysed as that plutocracy was a reward in return for a great favour. Another example in support of this argument is Mustafa Tlass who failed a coup attempt by Rifaat al-Assad against Hafez al-Assad in 1984 when he had a heart attack (Orient, 2015). However, this does not apply to the Khaddams, and there is no specific explanation for choosing Khaddam into the plutocracy. There are examples of figures who did a great favour to Hafez al-Assad but were not allowed into the plutocracy, such as Ali Haydar, which could be explained as Hafez al-Assad not wishing to create national figures, especially from the military, who might have challenged the transfer of power to his son. Ali Haydar was very close to Rifaat, however he fiercely refused the coup and reportedly said: 'I recognise no leader in the country other than Hafez al-Assad! What I have of power and prestige I owe to him. I am a soldier in his service and a slave to his beck and call. While I am alive I bear obedience to him and will not fall away from him.' (Moubayed, 2006: 55). Haydar was even arrested, imprisoned and retired on 3 August 1994, which could be explained as that he did not support grooming Bashar al-Assad for presidency following the death of his brother Basil, and he criticised Hafez al-Assad's recalling him to Syria from London (Holliday, 2013).

Mohammad Makhlouf did not only govern the society, but in many respects, contributed to the internal and external politics and decision-making (Alarab, 2013). He is estimated to have effectively controlled more than half the Syrian economy through powerful companies in the duty-free, communications, oil and gas production, and transportation in the air, sea and land, in addition to the production of olive oil, tobacco and hotels. There is no profitable industrial, commercial or agricultural project in Syria or in partnership with Syria except for a share of him (Shadid, 2011). He played a crucial role in getting rid of all the centres of power that surrounded Hafez al-Assad, and bringing him closer to Iran through trade deals and relations with Hezbollah. He was entrusted to qualify Bashar al-Assad for presidency after the death of Basil al-Assad in a car accident in 1994.[68]

Former Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zuabi's family developed extensive economic holdings, and shares in the duty-free shops at the country's airports and border crossings. The Jordan business guide reveals that most of the al-Zuabis transactional activities and commercial companies were registered in Jordan (Daleelalurdon, 2018). While this could be partially explained by tribal ties, and that his city of origin was closer to Amman than to Damascus,[69] it could express his fears of accountability. Mahmoud al-Zuabi (1935-2000) was involved in a scandal with French aircraft manufacturer Airbus (Associated Press, 2000). He had reportedly received illegal commissions of the order of 124.000.000 USD in relation to the purchase of six Airbus 320-200 passenger jets for Syrian Arab Airlines in

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[68] Author's interview with Mohamad Haj Ali.
[69] The distance between Daraa and Damascus is 111.8 km, while from Daraa to Amman is 104.2 km.

1996. The indictment alleged that the normal cost of the planes was 250.000.000 USD, but the government paid 374.000.000 USD and Airbus sent on 124.000.000 USD to the senior ministers (Aljazeera, 2017).

The historical alliance, the context in which it was fostered and how it has unfolded over Hafez al-Assad's three decades of rule provide an explanation of the emergence of plutocracy within the social construction and class formation (Fadil, 1997). Economic liberalisation, to be economically effective and politically unthreatening, required the emergence of a reconstructed bourgeoisie on good terms with the regime and prepared to invest and to push for liberalism (Hinnebusch, 2002: 132). Seale (1988: 457) argued that the regime needed a new bourgeoisie to lift up the economy, and replace the old bourgeoisie which the Baath Party fought (Makhlouf, 2016). The military-sectarian power configuration was tied to a particular order that rested on alliances and exchanges with certain socio-economic forces. These, in turn, broadened the ruling coalition and brought in strata that had a vested interest in the continuation of the ruling elite's monopoly over power in the form of a plutocracy. Political-economic alliances supported the regime and outlined certain features of the wider configuration. The regime was consolidated through historic alliance between the predominantly Alawite military officer corps and the Sunni merchant-business class. Studies of political economy of Syria under Hafez al-Assad point out that the regime engaged in restructuring economic forces, helping to engender the rise of strata whose vested interests were intimately tied to the ruling group (Springborg, 1993: 13-39). As such, it helped create commercial-business interests that worked in conjunction with the

state monopoly of most sectors of the economy, and that benefitted from the socialist principles guiding the economic policy. Liberalisation set the ground for the development of new social and political alliances that consolidated the regime (Lawson, 2009).

Economic developments constitute key variables in understanding the emergence of plutocracy. Volker Perthes[70] (1958-) classified the Syrian bourgeoisie into four groups. One line of division between what he called 'industrial bourgeoisie' and the 'new class of contractors and middlemen' marks a distinction between national capital and crony capitalism (Perthes, 1992: 207-230; Perthes, 1991: 31-37). These distinctions are important in the context of liberalisation and privatisation, as rent-seeking activities undermine trust and weaken interest in long-term investment in favour of quick-profit-making ventures. Lines of division marked the rise of new actors, known as *abnaul sulta[71]*, as key players in the new sectors of the economy. These new players have joined the commercial stratum engineered by the regime as a new class that has distinctive features. Of these are the flight of capital, the illegal appropriation of public resources, the usurious nature of investment and the web of connections (Lawson, 2009). Luxurious hotels, expensive restaurants and lavish shopping centres were erected to house, feed and clothe them and their business networks, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, which separated them from the rest of the population, not only in terms of wealth, but also in life style and expectations. The new developments were completely at odds with the origins

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[70] Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
[71] Arabic word meaning 'men of power'.

of the Baath party in the 1950s and 1960s, where the ruling class allied itself with the rural population against the feudal families and urban notables who monopolised power and wealth (Devlin, 1991: 1396-1407).

Hafez al-Assad's corrective movement was meant to correct the path of the neo-Baath Party, and to return to Aflaq's Baath Party ideology and theoretical principles. He ended an era of instability and a series of military coups through a strong regime (Owen, 2011: 395-396). The neo-Baath Party was hated, which made people look to Hafez al-Assad with hope and give him a chance. His initial attitude towards the state institutions was positive. He resituated the dignity of the writers and intellectuals, who were mistreated by the neo-Baath, especially the AWU. He tolerated the critical plays of Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-2006) and Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997) of the government and bureaucracy, and allowed them to be acted out on stage. The authority of the security was controlled, and arbitrary arrests were halted. State apparatus were prevented from confiscating private properties, and the police started to replace the security increasingly. He lifted the ban on importation and exportation, and provided guarantees for national and international capitals to invest in Syria (Qudsi, 1984).

The corrective movement called for economic reforms and achieved some results. Hafez al-Assad tried to modernise the agricultural and industrial sectors. One of his main achievements was the completion of the Tabaqa Dam on the Euphrates River in 1974, which was one of the biggest dams in the world. Its reservoir increased the irrigation of arable land, provided electricity, and encouraged

industrial and technical development. Many peasants and workers received increased financial income, social security, and improved health and education services. The urban middle classes, who had been hurt by the neo-Baath policies, obtained new economic opportunities (Reich, 1990). In 1984, he formed an anti-smuggling squad to control the Lebanon-Syria borders, which proved effective. It seized 3.800.000 USD worth of goods in its first week (The New York Times Magazine, 1984). In the early 1990s, the economy grew between 5%-7%, exports increased, the balance of trade improved, inflation remained moderate at 15%-18%, and oil exports increased. In 1991, the government liberalised the economy, which stimulated domestic and foreign private investment. Most of the foreign investors were Arab states of the GCC, which invested in infrastructure and development projects (Zisser, 1994).

Despite some success, chronic socio-economic difficulties remained and new ones appeared. Inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption in the government, public and private sectors, illiteracy, poor education, particularly in the rural areas, the increasing emigration of professionals, inflation, a growing trade deficit, a high cost of living and shortage of consumer goods remained paramount challenges. The financial burden of Syria's involvement in Lebanon since 1976 contributed to worsening economic problems and encouraged corruption and the black market. In 1984, a food crisis was so serious that Syria lacked sugar, bread, flour, wood, iron and construction equipment, which resulted in soaring prices, long queues, and a black market. In the mid-1990s, Syria entered another economic crisis due to a recession. In the late 1990s, Syria's economic growth was around 1.5%, which

was insufficient as the population growth was between 3%-3.5%, causing the GDP per capita to be negative (Perthes, 1992).

Relations between the state and business had taken the form of economic and policy networks that might or might not operate through formal institutions. These networks hijacked the official institutional expression of the private sector under the rubric of the government's reform policy of economic pluralism. Their ability to bypass or manipulate laws and regulations had significantly widened their reach and allowed them to shape general developmental change to economic productivity. The overlap of these networks with the decision-making bodies made rent seeking and rent allocation an extremely efficient process. These networks did not replace the existing institutions, but they operated side by side as a shadow form of organisations that were largely responsible for the growth of the economy. They were not merely the product of economically inefficient institutions. They emerged within the markets as a means for state elites and business partners to secure extraordinary benefits that could not be obtained under formal state-business arrangements. However, the motives for each differed. State elites were looking for security, and business partners were looking for profits that could not be obtained under constraints imposed on the private sector as a whole (Heydemann, 2004).

The regime of Hafez al-Assad has often been referred to as Alawite, which is too simplistic. Alawite political domination took forms of control over security positions, intelligence services and key army positions. However, civilian decision-

making and governance of the society was plutocratic. For three decades, the Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the al-Zuabis governed the country, and controlled the Syrian economy for their own benefit and the benefit of the regime (Makhlouf, 2016). The rule of the wealthy could hardly be seen beyond a needed paradigm and a necessity (Kherallah, 2017). Alawism went beyond the notion of a sect and became a social and political quality. Salwa Ismail[72] referred to the phenomenon as political Alawism; a form of rule that consecrates sectarianism and rests on a certain alliance and intersection of interests (Lawson, 2009).

Hafez al-Assad managed to change Alawism from a religious sect into a social and political quality to organise the political power. He correlated his fate with the fate of the Alawites and the fate of the Alawites with power. The fall of his regime would severely damage the Alawites as well as the other minorities. The attitude of Hafez al-Assad towards sectarianism remained debatable because it was mixed with loyalty (Dockser, 1984: 29-30). Seale (1988: 188) maintained that on the personal level, Hafez al-Assad was thought to hold contempt of sectarianism. Deeb (2012: 402-431) argued that Hafez al-Assad was a democratic leader, and his rule was not sectarian. He benefitted from the support of the Alawites for security, but did not allow them to abuse power.

The top elite remained a cross-sectarian coalition. Having taken power through alliances with senior Sunni military officers and party leaders, men such as

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[72] Professor of politics in the University of London SOAS.

Mohammad Makhlouf, Abdul Halim Khaddam, Mustafa Tlass and Mahmoud Zuabi had to share power at top elite level. Hafez al-Assad took pains not to be identified as a leader of an Alawite block in the regime, deliberately co-opted prestigious Sunni into the Baath Party and the state machinery, and stood above and balanced between elites of different backgrounds. The composition of the second ranks of the elite remained cross-sectarian. The representation of religious communities was more closely proportional to their shares of population (Van Dam, 1981: 126-129). The regime's complexity worked against single sect rule. The Alawite and non-Alawite members of the power elite amalgamated with the various fractions of the new and old Sunni bourgeoisies for class solidarity at the top (Hinnebusch, 2002).

Most of the Sunnis Hafez al-Assad appointed were his friends, or colleagues in the army or the Baath Party before assuming power, such as Abdullah al-Ahmar. Nominating Farouk al-Sharaa, a Sunni foreign minister, was meant to facilitate meeting with his Sunni Arab and Muslim counterparts, which the neo-Baath did not address. While the argument that state positions were filled by all religious sects was valid, security positions were mainly Alawites. The Alawites assumed senior positions in the army, security, party and public sector. They were forced into these positions because of poverty and underdevelopment (Van Dam, 1981; Aljazeera, 2014; Aljazeera, 2017). They made a network of connections which reflected on hundreds of thousands of their family members for living (Goldsmith, 2015).

Official positions were in support of the plutocracy, and were informally divided based on sect and region. The prime minister was a Sunni from Damascus, and was in charge of economic affairs. In 1978, Mahmoud al-Zuabi, a Sunni, was the first prime minister from Daraa. The ministers of defence and the interior were chosen carefully. The ministers of economy and information were Alawites. A precedent case was the nomination of Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad (1944-1983), an Alawite old friend of Hafez al-Assad, the minister of information at the age of 30. Security was governed by the Alawites, starting from Muhammad al-Khuli (1937-), who built the most complicated security apparatus with a direct link to Hafez al-Assad (Ziadeh, 2011).

The changing context and the serious challenges changed the attitude of Hafez al-Assad towards institutionalism and legitimacy (Dawisha, 1978: 341-354). He used the carrot and stick theory of motivation to attract more institutional support and loyalty and deter any opposition. Initially, he prioritised institutionalism and realised that continuity in power cannot only be through the military and security. He was keen to learn what people thought of his performance, because with the absence of a Western-style democracy, public satisfaction was seen as a reflection of legitimacy. He called for four referenda in the first three years of his rule: his candidacy for the presidency, the constitution, local councils, and a union with Egypt and Libya. Each referendum was accompanied by detailed awareness campaigns addressing the public opinion and explaining the importance of the referendum, which was an advanced stage if compared with the neo-Baath attitude. Nonetheless, it was also arguable that referenda and awareness

programs were controlled, monitored and channelled to come up with the desired results while preserving an illusion of popular democracy and sharing power. Journalists and writers were instructed not to criticise the regime, which was also criminalised by law. Labour unions were instructed to minimise their social and economic demands. Increasing challenges influenced Hafez al-Assad's policy. The turning point was the confrontation with the MB in 1980 (Aljazeera, 2015), when law 49/1980 was issued to punish its affiliates with the penalty of death (Abd-Allah, 1983).

State institutions and political life were restored after years of cessation. The parliament was restored under a new constitution with the participation of popular organisations. An NPF was founded on 7 May 1972 to engage the political parties in the rule, under the supervision of the Baath party. It was not an easy task to contain strong parties. It took from May 1971 to March 1972 to agree on a formula that the NPF was a coalition of parties, and was not a melting-pot. However, the multiparty system was not functional as the articles of the 1973 constitution nominated the Baath as the leading party in the society and the state. According to the charter of the NPF, the Baath Command members constituted half plus one of the total members. The NPF was, consequently, a mechanism to expand the popular base of the regime, without jeopardising the monopoly of the Baath party. As a result, despite focusing on rural development, the law of local administration engaged more popular participation in decision-making than the Baath Party or the NPF (Cantori, 1984: 99-124).

Hafez al-Assad realised the importance of a reconciliation with urban middle-class Sunnis to preserve the social, religious and ethnic mosaic structure of the society (Al-Taqi, 2012). He minimised the secular trends of the Baath Party, and addressed the urban Sunnis with traditional Islam discourse, which bridged the differences and led to more stability and popular acceptance. As a result, when he launched a war against the MB in the 80's, urban Sunnis, especially in Damascus, did not support their fellow Sunnis. Nonetheless, their neutrality might also have been out of fear, and that they did not want to turn Damascus into a war zone. Urban Sunnis, most of whom were from the educated middle class, along with other secular intellectuals, were pro stability, which mixed between national interests, real convictions and compromises (Seale, 1988).

The first three years of Hafez al-Assad's rule were characterised by stability. Sectarian challenge started to emerge on 31 January 1973. Departing from precedent, a new constitution was issued without naming Islam as the religion of the president of Syria. The unprecedented case was faced with anger, denial and demonstrations. It could be argued that Hafez al-Assad was testing the limits in the applicability of secularism as a technique to alter the conservative nature of the society, and any challenge that may result from that nature. The challenge significantly shaped his attitude towards the sensitivity of religion vis-à-vis rule in the Syrian society (Haymes, 2009). He restored the article on Islam, under the pressure of sheikh Hasan Habannakeah al-Maydani (1908-1978) (Al-Maydani, 1967), but explained that what was meant by Islam was tolerance, love, progress,

social equity and equality among all religions. It is modern Islam that cannot be strict or sectarian (Seale, 1988: 173).

Reconciliation and rapprochement between the secular Baath party and the Sunnis was a necessity for stability and survival, and was equally necessary for the legitimacy of the regime. A new stage of stability was attributed to the adaptation of the Baath Party and trimming its rigid secular and socialist ideology vis-à-vis religion. In 1974, Hafez al-Assad performed a pilgrimage to Mecca, which could be viewed as a gesture of good will rather than a religious conviction of the Alawite denomination. He increased the salaries of religious preachers. He was always being filmed performing the Sunni religious duties, and celebrating their religious occasions. He had never appeared performing Alawite rituals or celebrating Alawite occasions. He recognised the right of women to wear a veil. More mosques, religious schools and institutes of recitation opened. Most of these significantly carried al-Assad to be protected from the security and the Baath Party, which they might have viewed as concessions. Religious articles became permissible, and some preachers became independent MPs. Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929-2013), Marwan Sheikho (1940-2001) and Ahmed Kuftaro (1915-2004) were notable Sunni preachers who played a significant role in religiously legitimising the rule of Hafez al-Assad and the role of the plutocracy. Interestingly, they were all Kurds, which reflects Hafez al-Assad's general trend to engage religious and ethnic minorities in the power structure.

The urban middle class and bourgeoisie suffered from the Baath Party policies of nationalisation, socialism, austerity, and most importantly the purge of Sunnis from the army and the public sector (Al-Taqi, 2012), which Hafez al-Assad addressed by launching a series of reforms. Economically, he sought to appeal to investments which were challenged by nationalisation and conscription (BBC, 2017). A tax free zone was built for the importation of European perfumes, clothes, cosmetics and electric gadgets. Economic policies were accompanied by a political response. Hafez al-Assad announced a partial amnesty, which reflected the good will of a national reconciliation (Himesh, 1983). The applicability of the emergency laws, arbitrary detention and a travel ban were controlled without compromising security and stability.

Socio-economic changes were accompanied by a demographic relocation of the Alawites to Damascus (Fargues, 1993: 1-20). Since 1970, there has been a strong presence of the army, including large military bases stationed in the south and west of the capital. Officially, this positioning aimed at protecting Damascus against Israel, since the Golan front lies about 50 kilometres away. However, the goal was designated to control Damascus. Tens of thousands of troops, as well as senior officials and their families were concentrated in the city. While there were only 300 Alawites living in Damascus out of about 500,000 in 1947, this number rose to more than 500.000 out of about 5.000.000 by 2010 (Ballonch, 2016). Thus, the number of Alawites in Damascus exceeded their number in any other Syrian city. The Alawites were strategically distributed throughout Damascus (Olson, 1978: 654-681). Officials in the regime lived in the neighbourhood of al-Maliki,

around the private house of Hafez al-Assad, while civil servants of lower ranks lived in Mezzeh 86, a large area overlooking the rich neighbourhoods of Mezzeh. The suburbs of the predominantly Druze-Christian cities also attracted the Alawites, such as New Artuz, Jaramana and Sahnaya, which offered more sustainable lifestyles than the conservative Sunni areas of al-Ghouta, such as Douma, Darya and Zamalka.[73]

The conditions of the emergence of business networks was fostered by a political crisis of waning legitimacy. The conflict between the regime and the Islamists in the 1970s and 1980s was in many ways spurred by the perceived lack of both political and economic legitimacy of the regime from the perspective of excluded traditional sectors and small businesses in the traditional urban market of manufacturers and artisans (Heydemann, 2004). The regional context and the challenge of the MB jeopardised the regime (Seale, 1988: 458; Hames, 1986: 223; Pierret, 2013). Hafez al-Assad's reforms did not preserve the existing middle class. The average income was very low in the public sector and slightly better in the private sector. People were forced to seek an additional income through working overtime or through illegal practices of corruption (Dalilah, 2012). The turning point for Hafez al-Assad's reforms was the MB's failed attempt of assassination on 26 June 1980 (Aljazeera, 2015; Dickey, 1987: 58-76). It was the point when he began to develop a network that was distinct from the military base, and from the

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[73] See appendixes B, F.

Baath Party base. He needed a small number of the elite to govern the society through their wealth to consolidate his rule.

The confrontation between the regime and the MB was a hybrid of class, group and urban-rural conflict; a mix of attempted revenge by old class, disaffection by newly marginalised groups and a sectarian war stimulated by unequal access to public font of rent and patronage. The conflict was more powerfully rooted in the split between the city with its commercial spirit and the agrarian socialism of the village. While the conflict between Baathism and political Islam was growing, the Sunni middle class did not go over to the Islamic opposition. Upper-middle class professionals entered tactical alliances with the MB, but the generally liberal-minded were unreceptive to Islamic ideology. The university campuses were not swept by Islam. There was some sympathy for the MB among teachers and government employees, but their dependence on state employment, the strength of the secular centre, and the radical ideology of the MB deterred active pro MB opposition of the regime. Urban high school students played a role in the MB street protests, but the Baath Party had an organisation in the schools which mobilised counter demonstrations (Hinnebusch, 2002).

The management of political power and the attempted reform in the 1990s were inseparable from the preparation of a successor. Quick political, social and economic reforms were essential because of the particular nature of the successor (Ghadbian, 2001: 624-641). New parties were founded in 1992, and more economic reforms were launched in 1994. More political prisoners were released in 1991,

1995, 1998 and 1999 including the MB. In 1994, Kamal Baba, the minister of electricity, was dismissed for inefficiency. In 1996, Nadir al-Nabulsi, the minister of oil, was dismissed for corruption. Bashar al-Assad joined the anti-corruption campaign which reached Rifaat and Jamil al-Assad. Jamil al-Assad was exiled to Paris in 1997, and Rifaat al-Assad was dismissed from his position as the vice-president in 1998. Bashar al-Assad dismissed major personnel who had served with his father for three decades. In 1999, he closed an illegal seaport of Rifaat al-Assad, and in 2000 prosecuted the long serving prime minister, Mahmoud al-Zuabi (Becker, 2006: 65-91).

Accountability and fighting corruption aimed to propagandise an image of Bashar al-Assad as a saviour. What supports this argument is that Hafez al-Assad could have possibly launched the campaign in the seventies or eighties. In my interview with Ahmad Mohamad,[74] a top-level Syrian official, he argued that Hafez al-Assad was the founder of modern Syria who turned it into a power in the Middle East, and because of that he had the right to choose a successor (MacFarquhar, 2000). People had appreciated his self-denial and sacrifices for over three decades. Being grateful to him, people would righteously support his choice of a successor as a reward and end-of-service compensation. Mohamad argued that a known successor of Hafez al-Assad's choice would save the risks of instability or fight for power and preserve the existing order and stability.

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[74] Author's interview with Ahmad Mohamad.

Basing on primogeniture and an assessment of the relative suitability of personalities to the demands of rule, Hafez al-Assad initially chose his oldest son, Basil, in the early 1990s (Zisser, 1994: 136-139). Upon the death of Basil al-Assad in an automobile accident at Damascus International Airport in January 1994, Bashar al-Assad was promptly put in his place to be groomed for succession. Hafez al-Assad worked systematically to prepare him for power in what turned out to be six and half years. The process of preparation moved on three levels: The build-up of Bashar al-Assad's support within the military and security apparatus, the build-up of Bashar al-Assad's standing with the Syrian public, and the familiarisation of Bashar al-Assad with the substantive dimensions of his future role (Leverett, 2005: 61).

Succession evoked the engagement of plutocracy, the Alawites and the Baath Party. The build-up of Bashar al-Assad's military credentials was carried out by Mustafa Tlass, who in his capacity as the minister of defence expressed his full support (Fyodorov, 2015). A complicated process of ideologisation by Abdullah al-Ahmar, the secretary-general of the Baath Party, shaped Bashar al-Assad as a national leader and a reformer (The Irish Times, 2000; Leverett, 2005: 57-68). He drew an image of him as a resistant to Israel, which had been seen as a criterion for legitimacy and nationalism by Arab regimes for decades. Mottos chanted 'al-Assad forever', 'al-Assad or nobody' and 'al-Assad or we burn the country'. The plutocracy built up an image of Bashar al-Assad standing with the public by replacing the image of Basil standing with the military. In 1995, posters of Basil al-Assad were replaced with posters of Bashar al-Assad. Posters of Hafez, Basil and

Bashar al-Assad read: our leader, our ideal, and our hope respectively. Bashar al-Assad's posters were coupled with Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanon (Stacher, 2011: 197-212).

In 1994, an unprecedented case was the dismissal of Ali Haydar (1932-), the long-serving commander of the Special Forces. In 1995, Adnan Makhlouf, the commander of the Republican Guard and a nephew of Hafez al-Assad's wife was sacked. In 1998, Hikmat Shihabi (1931-2013), a Sunni long-serving chief of staff was retired and replaced by Ali Aslan (1932-), an Alawite loyalist of the Assad family (Zisser, 2000). These changes in the military were importantly accompanied by changes in the security. Bashir Najjar, the long-serving head of the General Intelligence Directorate, was replaced by Ali Khuri. Two young officers loyal to Bashar al-Assad were placed in the Intelligence Directorate. Brigadier-General Bahjat Sulayman (1949-) was stationed to the internal branch, and Brigadier-General Ayyad Mahmud was stationed to the external branch of the Directorate. They became increasingly influential, and later more powerful than Muhammad Nassif, the deputy of the Intelligence Directorate (Zisser, 2000). In the 1990s, Assef Shawkat (1950-2012), Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law was appointed the chief of military intelligence. In 2000, the long-serving chief of military intelligence, Major-General Ali Duba (1933-), was replaced with his deputy, Major-General Hassan Khalil, who was less likely to challenge Bashar al-Assad over position or policy (Levertt, 2005: 63; Deeb, 2012: 687).

Conclusion

As Karl Wittfogel[75] described the regimes in the Middle East, the state is stronger than society. Such rule maintained a great distance between concerns of the ruler and those of the ruled (Kedourie, 1994: 8). The ruler's first concern was that there should be no challenge to his power and that as much wealth as possible should be squeezed out of the ruled to pay for his army and his court. Contrariwise, the main preoccupation of the ruled was to keep as low a profile as possible to find ways of living with the exaction and the caprice of the ruler and his servants. Given that, there could be no question of representative bodies being set up to carry on a dialogue between the ruler and the ruled, neither could there be institutions for local self-government, nor could craft or professional associations flourish unhindered, since they would always be suspected of limiting the sway of the government over its subjects.

The stability of the regime depended on a combination of different factors. A cohesive ruling elite was able to link its interests with those of the powerful plutocracy in the society. The alliance of interests was expressed in the political idea of Baathism, which made the power of regime legitimate in the eyes of a significant part of the society. A vast number of men and women were connected with the plutocracy or dependent upon it, and therefore willing to help it maintaining its power. The regime and the plutocracy were complementary. The regime had means of control and repression such as the security and the army,

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[75] German-American historian.

which were able to crush any movement of revolt at whatever cost, and the plutocracy had a direct control over the whole of society.

The historical study of Syria from 1970-2000 shows that an elite group derived power from their wealth and governed the society for their own benefit and the benefit of the regime. Plutocracy emerged as an elite of the wealthy started to control the political, economic and social life. In practice, the consolidation of power was attached to an elite of the wealthy to govern the society and manage political power and calls for greater democracy. Plutocracy was not a conceptual or political idea, however in practice an elite of the wealthy governed the society since the 1970s through their wealth, and was the operational heart of plutocracy. The state institutions have been put under the control of the wealthy through a network of connections, the Baath party and Alawism.

No decisive choice between state and private strategies was clearly made. What crystallised was rather a mix of state, and co-operative and private tenure forms. Agrarian policy expressed a pragmatic muddling through zigzagging under the competitive influence of statists and liberalisers, peasants and bourgeoisie. Yet, in defending a co-operative and state agricultural sector, the regime continued to block the bourgeoisie from reasserting control over the bulk of agrarian surplus which in part was retained by the peasantry, and in part extracted by the state itself. The Baath Party pursued an agrarian revolution that largely benefitted the rural areas and incorporated the peasantry into national life. This constituted the social base of Baathism and imparted stability to the regime. The agrarian policy managed to combine greater equality with greater growth. However, the Baath

extracted little from agriculture, with no industrial revolution taking place. The state came to rely on rents of oil and aid, partly as a result of greater rural prosperity, social mobility and integration of rapid greater population growth and urbanisation, generating an unemployment crisis.

Authority was built through a complex mix of techniques and strategies. Traditional techniques with long roots in the political culture such as kin and sect were used to forge a reliable elite core dominating the army and security. More modern political techniques, coordinated money interests, party ideology, organisations and bureaucratic control consolidated control over society. The incorporation of a significant array of interests included the army, the minorities, as well as sections of key social forces including the plutocracy, the salaried middle class, the peasantry and the working class who gave the regime a cross-class, urban rural social base. Popular legitimacy rested on Arabism and a populist social ideology. At the top, Hafez al-Assad was balancing between competing groups and social forces. A process of economic liberalisation was under way, promoted by the decision to engage with the Barcelona Process, whereby Mediterranean basin countries were able to have access to financial and technical assistance from the EU institutions while negotiating economic agreements. Nonetheless, Syria retained a state-dominated system, with no private banks, no capital market, and no mobile phone operators. This was the condition which Bashar al-Assad inherited in 2000.

V.   Chapter Four: The 2000 Damascus Spring, and the Plutocracy

Introduction

This chapter analyses plutocracy between 2000-2005. It identifies the plutocrats and empirically charts the development of plutocracy and interaction with the Damascus Spring. The year 2000 marked a change in the plutocracy, personality and actors. Mahmoud al-Zuabi was expelled from the Baath Party on 10 May 2000 and was prosecuted over an alleged scandal involving the French aircraft manufacturer Airbus (Associated Press, 2000). The Makhloufs, the Khaddams and the Tlasses continued to govern society through their wealth and a network of connections. They led the economic system for their own benefit and the benefit of the regime. The Baath Party was no longer about socialism or the Arab nationalism of the 1970s, but rather about maintaining the rule of the wealthy through a network of intertwined military and economic posts (The Washington Institute, 2006).

The development of the plutocracy, especially since 2000, occurred within a changing regional context. Shortly after Bashar al-Assad assumed power, Ariel Sharon, the leader of the opposition in the Israeli parliament at the time, visited the Esplanade of al-Aqsa Mosque (BBC, 2000). The internal and external positions in Lebanon and Palestine were unstable with the eruption of a new Palestinian uprising in September 2000. The 9/11 attacks marked the beginning of a new era and a sharp transition in the US political doctrine, approach and perception of terrorism. The PATRIOT Act was passed in 2001, and ground forces were on the Syrian borders in 2003. For the hawks, there was no place in the Middle East for a

Baath-like ideology (McHugo, 2014: 210). The Lebanese prime minister, Rafic al-Hariri (1944-2005), was assassinated in 2005, and the UNSCR 1559 ended the Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. Israel launched a military assault against Lebanon in 2006, and against Gaza in 2008 (Deeb, 2012: 774).

The Damascus Spring was the name given to the first six months of Bashar al-Assad's tenure. It witnessed remarkable political openness, which reflected on the intellectuals as well as the ordinary people. It witnessed general amnesties to political prisoners, the licensing of private newspapers, a fundamental change in the state-controlled media outlets, the provisions of political forums, and salons in which open criticism was tolerated. It mobilised a number of political demands, principally the cancellation of the state of emergency and abolition of martial law and special courts; the release of all political prisoners; the return without fear of prosecution of political exiles; and the right to form political parties and civil organisations.

In 2000, Bashar al-Assad[76] inherited a state governed by plutocracy, ridden by corruption and dominated by an inefficient public sector. The economic situation was deteriorating, and the numbers of urban unemployment and underemployment were increasing. The population was growing at 2.4% per annum with 65% below the age of 25 (McHugo, 2014: 214). Many young people coming to the job market were university graduates, and owed their education to the Baath policies. He

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[76] A distinction has to be made between Bashar al-Assad, the plutocracy and the regime. Regime is an intermediate stratum between the government which makes day-to-day decisions and is easy to alter, and the state which is a complex bureaucracy tasked with a range of coercive functions (Sheila, 2014). According to the definition, Bashar al-Assad, the government, state institutions and the plutocracy are interactive constituents of the regime, but are not used interchangeably.

announced a series of reforms, but these were insignificant because they did not fundamentally change the system. The plutocracy's void reforms through corruption and manipulation of the laws and public funds deprived people of any interests (Dalilah, 2012).

Who are the plutocracy[77]

The identification of the political system as a plutocracy derives from the examination of the empirical evidence, not the claims of Bashar al-Assad himself or others in leadership positions. Bashar al-Assad himself was vague about the nature of the system and apparently saw no need to define it with any political label. Plutocracy is not a bloc, but has been used in this thesis to refer to four families as the operational heart of the plutocracy who controlled most of the wealth and business networks in Syria. Andrew Tabler[78] described the financial arrangements of the regime as the real mortar that held the regime together (Tabler, 2011).

Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad used plutocracy as a type of regime to manage political power and calls for greater democracy, but had the appearances of being disassociated from wealth and transactional approach to power so that they did not appear at odds with the socialist ideology of the Baath Party, or their image as reformers, fighting corruption and standing by the side of people. They benefitted from the plutocracy financially, economically and politically in a two-way complementary relationship. They needed the plutocracy for governance and

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[77] The plutocracy is not a bloc, but has been used in this thesis to refer to four families as the operational heart of the plutocracy who controlled most of the wealth and businesses networks in Syria.
[78] Syria's expert at the Washington Institute for Near East policy.

the survival of the regime, and the plutocracy needed the regime to advance its economic interests.

Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad were on top of the plutocracy and in full command of it, not the other way around. They were also on top of the security and the army, and acted as the only link between them to keep the balance of power without jeopardising their rule (Hinnebuxch, 2002). A quality of the plutocracy is that the security and the army are not allowed into it or to mix with it. The Assads acted as the only link between them to keep the balance of power without jeopardising their rule. The case of Tlass is contested but is not an exception because despite his position as the minister of defence, he could not be looked at as a military man. He was just a safe and loyal figure, while power was concentrated in the hands of the Alawite army and airbase's commanders.
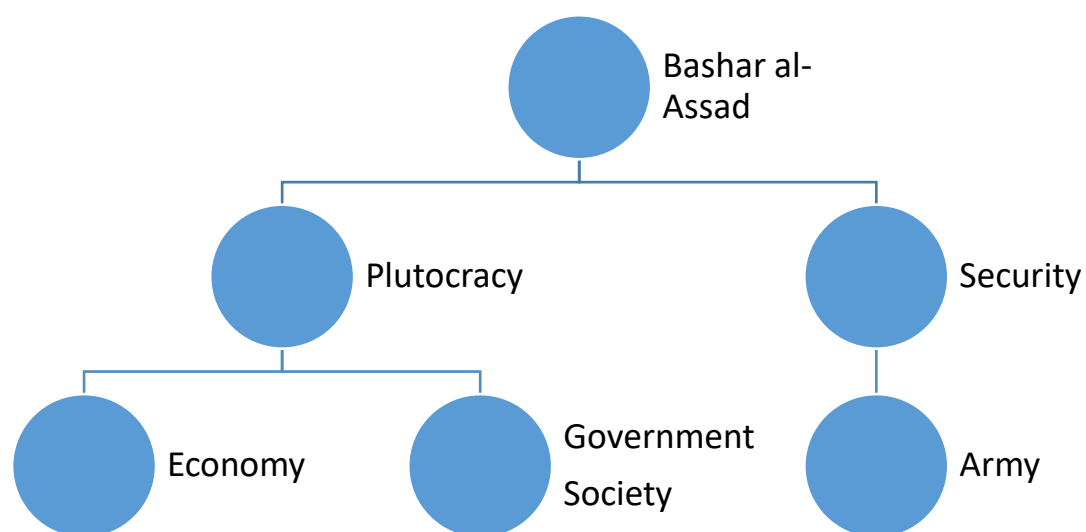
Bashar al-Assad and a close tiny elite owned around 60% to 70% of Syria's assets, from land and factories to energy plants and licences to sell foreign goods (Inman, 2012). In practice, the Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the al-Zuabis and the Tlasses were the operational heart of the plutocracy. They started to govern the society since the 1970s through their wealth and their influential companies in various sectors,[79] a network of connections and the Baath Party. The society was governed by the wealth and transactional approach of companies, while positions, Baathism or Alawism made the network of connections. What supports this claim is that the predecessor and successors of Abdul Halim Khaddam, Mustaf Tlass and Mahmoud al-Zuabi in the same positions, did not have wealth, did not govern the society and did not have a political or economic leverage.

Examples extend to all prime ministers since independence in 1946, up to the Baath era between 1963-1967, the neo-Baath era between 1967-2000, the era of Hafez al-Assad between 1970-2000 and the era of Bashar al-Assad between 2000-2018 such as Muhammad Mustafa Mero between 2000-2003, Muhammad Naji al-Otari between 2003-2011, Adel Safar between 2011-2012, Riyad Hijab between 2011-2012, Omar Ghalawanji in 2012, Wael al-Halaqi between 2012-2016 and Imad Khamis since 2016 (SANA, 2018; al-Thawra, 2018). Examples also extend to all ministers of defence since independence in 1946 up to 2018 such as Hasan Turkmani between 2004-2009, Ali Habib between 2009-2011, Dawoud Rajiha between 2011-2012, Fahd Jassem al-Freij between 2012-2018 and Ali Ayyoub since 2018 (Tishreen, 2018). These examples support the claim that plutocracy

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[79] See appendix A.

was a phenomenon, and that the powers of the Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the al-Zubis, and their governance of the Syrian society was not based on their positions, Alawism or Baathism, but on their influential companies in different sectors and their network of connections (Makhlouf, 2016).

A marker of the plutocracy is that the Makhloufs, for example, governed the society since the year 2000 without having an official position. Zaher Jamil[80] noted in an interview with the Associated Press News Agency that the monopoly had frozen wealth accumulation by the Syrian State, at the time it accumulated it to the individuals in control of it. The Makhloufs' monopoly of communication networks withheld huge sums of money from the state's treasury, that could have been used in economic development (Al-Sadi, 2015). The plutocracy coercively controlled the articulation of private economy and forcefully imposed partnership on entrepreneurs, businesses and investments, which reflected particularly on large and medium businesses (Al-Aan, 2016).

The Makhloufs' wealth is estimated at 200 billion USD. Rami's wealth is estimated at 30 billion USD, through which they governed the society (Al-Aan, 2016). Rami Makhlouf was a policymaker, and a decision-maker without having an official position. People humorously noted that businesses were either for the Makhloufs, or against the law. He issued ad hoc resolutions to control the public and private funds. He won the tenders automatically, cashed the money and did not perform many of the contracts he signed with the public sector to build roads and bridges

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[80] Economic analyst.

and to develop the infrastructure. He founded al-Sham Company to incorporate entrepreneurs' companies, and to provide facilities in return for partnership. In 2002, he monopolised telecommunications through operating the leading cellular telephone service provider SyriaTel, and control the sister shadow company MTN (Leverett, 2005: 84), which deprived the state from the second largest sources of national income after oil. He is estimated to control 60% of the Syrian economy through the two only holding companies owned by the plutocracy, which he described as a mosaic of the society and a representation of the national economy, that will face no difficulties, and will work in all fields (Haji, 2008).

The Makhloufs controlled the Real Estate Bank, the strongest state-run bank, which gave them privileged access to capital for their business. Rami, along with his brother Ihab, controlled the free zone, Syrian-Lebanese borders, and the duty free shops in Syria's airports. Rami developed extensive economic holdings in oil and gas, building, airlines, tourism and retail companies. Al-Madaen ran most of the touristic hotels, estates and restaurants. Lo'lo' was the first private jet to operate in Syria. He had extensive holdings in all banks, such as The Islamic Bank, Byblos Bank, Barakeh Bank, Qatar International Bank, al-Sham Bank and Jordan Bank. He also developed extensive economic holdings in insurance companies. He controlled the oil and gas sector through his British Gulfsands Foreign Company. He controlled the real estate sector through different companies such as al-Fajer, Petra, al-Hadaeq. He controlled the media through different means such as the al-Watan newspaper, Ninar TV and Dunia Satellite channel, in addition to mass media through his Promedia company. He owned al-Shwefat International School, and

the Syrian International University for Science and Technology. He controlled the industrial sector through Eltel Middle East Company and TB Ramac (Makhlouf, 2016; Al-Aan, 2016).

Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam had the most balanced combination of power assets. He was the oldest party comrade of Hafez al-Assad, had substantial Baath Party seniority, connections to the Alawite power brokers, and alliances within the army and business networks (Hinnebusch, 2002: 73). His family's net wealth was estimated at 1.1 billion USD (Khazen, 2004: 65-84) in lavish castles, villas, yachts and money in French, Swiss and Lebanese banks. He received bribes from Lebanese politicians to nominate or maintain them in key positions. He developed extensive economic holdings in Syrian, Lebanese, Pakistani, and Saudi telecommunications, and in the Lebanese electricity sector. He developed food-processing and restaurants, in addition to fashion shops, models and chocolates. Afya is a bad quality canned meat company that monopolised the army supply. He had an exclusive franchise of IBM computers, Coca Cola, Philip Morris cigarettes and Patchi chocolate. He developed holdings in the media sector such as the al-Sham Film Producing Company in partnership with the ART owned by the Saudi sheikh Kamel Saleh. Additionally, the Khaddams had car rental companies, oil companies, restaurants, and fun cities (Tishreen, 2006; al-Thawra, 2006).

Former Minister of Defence Mustafa Tlass's family developed extensive economic holdings in military manufacture, telecommunications and the media sector. His son Firas founded the group Min Ajli Suriya to run the business (Al-Aan, 2016). Firas is described as a business tycoon and king of sugar. He was the second

richest person in Syria after Rami Makhlouf (MacFarquhar, 2012; Zina, 2011; Josef, 2012). Min Ajli Suriya dealt with different commercial activities ranging from roasting coffee beans to producing metal, canned food, and dairy products. It also provided the army with clothes, food and medicine (Al-Arabiya, 2012). Firas was the local joint venture partner for the French Lafarge Cement Company (Fielding-Smith, 2012). He was also the chairman of Palmyra-SODIC, and the general manager of the Palmyra Real Estate Development Company (Hills, 2009).

Mahmoud al-Zuabi was expelled from the Baath Party on 10 May 2000 and was prosecuted over a scandal involving the French aircraft manufacturer Airbus (Associated Press, 2000). His assets were frozen by the government. His suicide on 21 May 2000 remained controversial.[81] The official SANA reported that he committed suicide after he learned that the police chief arrived at his home to give him a judicial notice asking him to appear before the investigating judge to answer charges of corruption related to the Airbus deal (SANA, 2000). However, he was prosecuted after revealing sensitive information about the funds of late Basil al-Assad in the Swiss banks, and the revenues of the Ministry of Oil. His death was after he threatened to reveal the corruption deals of the plutocracy and their business networks (Eqtsad, 2017).

The development of the plutocracy between 2000-2005

Both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad opened up the economy at various times and to varying degrees, but the primary beneficiaries were usually those already tied into

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[81] Author's interview with Bashar al-Haj Ali, the nephew of Mahmoud al-Zuabi.

the regime through familial, business or political connections. Efforts of openness and market-orientated reforms reflected negatively as they enriched an elite group which was linked to the regime politically or by family connections. What started to develop was not a liberal capitalist system, but a cronyocracy and plutocracy. Crony capitalists benefitted from selective privatisation that appeared to be funnelled towards plutocrats who were already economically and politically in a position to take advantage of it. The Makhloufs, the Khaddams and the Tlasses monopolised important sectors of the economy, and became the gateway for other domestic and foreign investors to do business in Syria.

In 2000, the plutocracy had already been governing the society through a network of connections and the Baath Party. It developed a dynasty to match and fit with Bashar al-Assad. The plutocrats were succeeded by their families who maintained their roles. Bashar al-Assad maintained the plutocracy with no changes during the first five years of his rule. Rami Makhlouf replaced his father Mohammed. Firas Tlass replaced his father, Mustafa while Manaf Tlass commanded the 104th Republican Guard Brigade. Jamal Khaddam replaced his father Abdul Halim without having an official position, which supports the argument that the governance of society was through wealth, not positions. The dynasty also applied to the network of connections in state institutions in support of the plutocracy.

Plutocracy was in many ways untouchable. Bashar al-Assad set his own plutocrats as regime key pillars without changing the established policies or threatening his father's plutocrats. He developed a kind of alternative regime alongside the late power structure, and used it as a basis for a long-term strategy of gradually co-

opting the established order (Perthes, 2004: 9-11). The core of the emerging alternative structure was his personal network, inner circle and supporters. The network consisted of two strands. The first were individuals who advised him personally from outside the government and could be labelled as kitchen cabinet. The second were individuals based outside the government that he placed directly into official positions. Asma al-Akhras was the most intimate member of the kitchen cabinet. Along with the G-18, [82] she significantly contributed to his perception of economic policies. The mission of the kitchen cabinet was to focus on economic policy and identify the economic arena as a priority for reform. They sought to balance the influence of the old guard and provide alternative sources and policy advice (Leverett, 2005: 72-73).

Informal business networks linked the state powers with businesses' communities (Perthes, 2004: 99). Rami Makhlouf was a typical example of the hegemony of the plutocracy over politics. From his office in Damascus, he hired ministers, governors, commanders and general directors, where he also ran a network of connections and established clientelism. He relocated to Dubai in order to distance himself from people's discontent with his corruption and monopoly, and for better communication with international corporations. Working remotely, he found difficulties running the business in Syria. He was no longer able to summon the concerned minister or officer to his office to sign or to listen to instructions, which he could not do over the phone. To solve the problem, he directly hired the high ranking officials who were loyal to him, and who knew what to do to keep the

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[82] A group of 18 advisors on economic issues founded by Bashar al-Assad.

business successful and growing. Most of them were corrupt, with bad records. For example, he had chosen Adib Mayaleh as the governor of the Central Bank of Syria and later as the minister of economy and foreign trade. In the 1990s Mayaleh worked in the commercial section of the French embassy in Damascus. He was dismissed for selling sensitive data of the French companies in Syria to competitive companies. Rami Makhlouf rehabilitated him by equalising his doctorate to Syrian degrees, nominating him a lecturer in the Faculty of Economics at Damascus University, and later recommending him as an ambassador to the European Union, which was declined by the French (Haji, 2008; Enabbaladi, 2017).

Rami Makhlouf sought to replace Omar Sankar who had been a Mercedes-Benz exclusive agent for decades. When the company declined the offer, the government tailored an antitrust law to cancel exclusive agencies. The purpose was to place pressure on the company. When Mercedes clung to Sankar, the government issued punitive legislations like preventing the importation of spare parts, and contracting with Syrian public and private sectors for three years. Mercedes-Benz did not comply with the pressure, which reflects an international responsible attitude towards plutocracy, while the punitive legislations remained in force despite the need of the market for spare parts (Haji, 2008). Rami Makhlouf's failure stimulated him to seize BMW, Audi and Lexus, and to instruct the minister of defence to replace the official cars of the Republican Palace, regional command and minister's cabinet with these brands (Al-Sadi, 2015). Rami Makhlouf dismissed Sankar as an MP, and expelled him from Syria, which reflects his powers in governing the society.

Additionally, Rami Makhouf governed the society vis-à-vis foreign investments, internal and external trade. He signed a partnership contract with Orascom, an Egyptian company owned by Naguib Sawiris, to operate mobile services in 2002. Upon disagreement, the Syrian courts sided with Rami Makhlouf and confiscated Sawiris' shares and assets and nominated two judicial guards; his brother Ihab, and his secretary Nader Kalai. Rami Makhlouf only feared Sawiris' threat of international arbitration, and soon announced a settlement, which suggests the important role that the international community can play in local plutocracy, rejecting a monopoly and encouraging an internationally-recognised democratic economic system. Rami Makhlouf's control over the judiciary and security apparatus and manipulation of the law discouraged economic reform as well as foreign investments (Haji, 2008).

The Makhloufs were in a partnership among themselves in support of Bashar al-Assad through a business network and an established network of connections in the state institutions (Al-Sadi, 2015). Rami governed the society through various companies, while brother Hafez, a brigadier-general in the air force Military Intelligence and the National Security Bureau, coerced any economic competition (Makhlouf, 2016). Rami was the chairman of the board of directors of a multifunctional company, Ramac; Hani was the head of a multifunctional company, al-Hani Economic Group. Ihab was the head of al-Aqila Company; Sana was the head of camera production companies; Khaldun was the head of airlines and transportation companies.

The system of patrimonial rewards that started in the 1970s to guarantee loyalty had created substantial barriers to the entry of new potential rivals to the existing plutocracy. The plutocracy collaborated together to govern the society and discourage new entrants. Within a lawful framework and state media coverage, the Makhloufs monopolised projects, franchises, and supply of governmental bids. They developed extensive economic holdings and built a commercial empire (Mansour, 2016). The Damascus Spring witnessed timid attempts of penetration of the plutocratic monopoly, which was not encouraged or welcomed. For example, when Waddah Abd Rabbo returned from Paris to establish Syria's first private daily newspaper, *al-Watan*, in response to a new media law enacted in 2000 that allowed the establishment of private media, bureaucratic difficulties forced him to conduct business under a French licence despite the fact that the printing house was based in Damascus. Rabbo was effectively forced to use the state-owned printing presses, which he described as unwelcoming procedures (Corbin, 2007).

The Khaddams' governance of society through their influential companies was absolute and unquestionable. Despite their lack of experience, they focused on the audio-visual sector and mixed between the governance of society and the advancement of their own businesses, investments and advantages (Hinnebusch, 2015). The scandal of nuclear waste was an example of their power that has never been challenged. They have reportedly accepted German bribes to bury nuclear waste in the Syrian desert. They endangered the health of the Syrian people in return for money (The Washington Institute, 2006).

Tlass's transactional approach to govern the society was more skilful and less provocative than that of the Khaddams and the Makhloufs. He tended to be more like a money launderer. He set up projects such as restaurants and real estate investments. The practices of Tlass took less severe forms, such as the forceful sale of his own products to the state. One example is that cadets in the army were forcefully given a copy of a book issued by the Tlass Printing House priced at 75 Syrian pounds. They were asked to sign the receipt of their salaries for the month in question in full, while the price of the book was deducted from it. The cadets complained because they did not want to buy the book and wanted their salaries in full. The accountants replied that these were the orders of Mustafa Tlass himself. If anyone had an objection, trucks were ready to come and load them to Tadmor Prison because they were refusing military orders (Shalghin, 2004).

The development of the plutocracy, especially since 2000, occurred within a changing regional context. The 9/11 attacks and the US attitude towards the Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts with Israel raised the question of Syria's support of terrorist groups and non-state actors. Bashar al-Assad attempted to ease the US pressure by providing intelligence co-operation on al-Qaeda, which would at the same time alter the development of a potential Sunni threat to his rule. After the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the regime feared to be the next domino. It allegedly facilitated the infiltration of *jihadists* from Syria to Iraq to fight the US forces. At the same time, the Palestinian groups in Syria were instructed to leave Syria voluntarily, to force them to negotiate with Israel and revive the peace process. Bashar al-Assad tried to maintain his regional leverage by renewing the

presidency of Emile Lahoud in Lebanon. Nonetheless, the UNSCR 1559 which was issued following the assassination of Rafic al-Hariri, and the report of the UN investigator Detlev Mehlis reshaped Bashar al-Assad's relation with Lebanon and the international community. UNSCR 1636 decided that Syria was not fully co-operating with the SC, which was followed by UNSCR 1680 to demark the borders between Syria and Lebanon and establish diplomatic relations (Abdulaziz, 2007; Ziadeh, 2007).

Although Syria was not on Bush's axis of evil, the US was critical of Bashar al-Assad's support of international terrorism and possession of WMDs. The US was also critical of his policies towards the Middle East peace process, his military presence in Lebanon and his politics towards Iraq, which altered any possibilities of a positive US change towards him. Bashar al-Assad did not fit in Bush's declaration following the 9/11 attacks: that 'in the war on terrorism, you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'. While Bush stated that it was time for Syria to decide which side of the war against terror it was on, in his speech to the Arab Summit Conference in 2000, Bashar al-Assad debated that there is a difference between terrorism and resistance; the difference between one who has a right and the other who usurps this right (SANA, 2002). From a strategic point of view, Bashar al-Assad aspired to pursue his father's broad regional ambitions and play an influential regional role, which was challenged by the lack of resources if compared with Iraq or Turkey. His support of non-state actors was the strongest card to increase his influence in regional discussions and bring Israel and Turkey to negotiations. Any change in the inherited policies would alter his image as a

continuation of his father. An advisor to Bashar al-Assad argued that he did not derive his legitimacy from the fact that he was the son of the late president, but from his adherence to his father's political legacy (Schneider, 2003: 239). Bashar al-Assad's regional policy boosted his popularity at home, and helped him improve his relationship with Iran, without breaking the policies that has been established since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. It justified the claim to be the leading Arab state against Israel, which was a main source of revenues. A settlement with Israel would deprive him of claiming aid from the GCC as a frontline state. It would also alter the justification of the emergency laws. Bashar al-Assad was under pressure and sanctions of the international community on his WMDs, which he had seen as a deterrent. Another challenge came from his exit from Lebanon, which was economically vital for the Syrian economy. It was the financial lung that allowed Syria to breathe, and was an important source of income for the plutocracy, military commanders, and thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon (Tabler, 2011). The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 cut the Syrian revenues from trade with Iraq, especially the pipeline connecting the Kirkuk oil field in Iraq to the Syrian Mediterranean port of Banyas (Schneider, 2003: 231-336). Bashar al-Assad's largest breach of the UN sanctions against Iraq reflected his desperate attempt to boost the economy.

The changing regional context increased the pressure on Bashar al-Assad to fortify his position at home amid international isolation and sanctions. He faced four major challenges to his foreign policy. The first was how to handle the assassination of Rafic al-Hariri and its regional and international consequences,

particularly the international court. The second was to strike a balanced attitude towards the conflicting active players in the region, namely Iran, KSA, and Egypt. The third was to establish a foreign policy that did not recognise the US invasion of Iraq; but dealt with an Iraqi government under the US occupation. He handled the Iraqi government with pragmatism and disregarded the paradox. The fourth was to rethink the necessity of establishing a foreign policy based on the reality and necessities of the home policies. A tactful withdrawal from Lebanon would decrease Syria's regional and international leverage, but would increase its national unity through the engagement of active political parties and democratic institutions (Abdulaziz, 2007; Ziadeh, 2007).

The role of the Baath Party in support of the regime and the plutocracy had witnessed a remarkable retreat since the year 2000. Bashar al-Assad did not realise the importance of the Baath Party and underestimated its role in bringing him to power. He ended the Baath Party's monopoly of the local newspapers, and allowed other political parties to begin publishing their own newspapers (Schneider, 2003: 227; Barada, 2009). His speeches did not reflect a strong conviction in the Baath Party. In 2004, Bashar al-Assad noted that the Baath ideology no longer mattered. He humorously noted, 'If it contributes to prosperity in Syria, we can call it socialism.' (Leverett, 2005: 70). His attitude towards the Baath Party reflected on loyalty, which was the main criterion for Hafez al-Assad to share power.

For decades the Baath Party had been an instrument of control over the populist corporatism, and a tank of loyalists. It served as a link between the regime and its

constituency. First, it functioned as a locus of individual interest articulation, intervening with the bureaucracy to redress grievances, place clients in jobs, and generally to lubricate the creaky workings of the state. Second, the party continued to recruit plebeian elements into the elite to sustain this base of support. It controlled an array of corporatist associations through which differentiated societal sectors were brought under the regime, through the creation of popular organisations which incorporated peasants, youth, and women (Hinnebusch, 2002: 78-79).

Plutocracy and the transition of power

The nomination of Bashar al-Assad reflects the most significant example of the power of the plutocracy in governing the society and deciding upon the transition of power, which would not have been possible without Mohammad Makhlouf, Abdul Halim Khaddam and Mustafa Tlass (Alarab, 2013). It reflects the power of plutocracy over the populace in the controversy over the legitimacy, legality and constitutionality of the process. As Rifaat al-Assad viewed it illegal and unconstitutional (Deeb, 2012: 723), Bouthaina Shaaban commented: 'It was very difficult for us to know that someone who was with us so long was now gone. It was a shock – really, you don't want anything to change. It was frozen, and you just want the country to remain frozen without anything changing. So this is probably what everyone wanted, and Bashar al-Assad was the obvious choice who could make us feel that Hafez al-Assad didn't die – there is continuity, we are fine, and the country is going to be OK.' (Lesch, 2005: 71).

When Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000, power had already been personalised by the head of state. The plutocracy governed the society through their wealth and supported succession. The governance of society by plutocracy prevented the emergence of national figures that would jeopardise the transfer of power. The famous figures were defamed, hated and associated with the lack of public legitimacy. The army and the security supported the plutocracy and the succession. They were not positioned to challenge Bashar al-Assad because their responsibilities were divided. The intelligence agencies watched each other and referred directly to the president. Mustafa Tlass, in his capacity as the minister of defence, expressed his admiration of Bashar al-Assad, and announced his full support of him (Fyodorov, 2015).

Succession went smoothly without altering the status quo of the plutocracy, or compromising their political and economic privileges. On 11 June, Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam, in his constitutional capacity as the acting president, announced Bashar al-Assad's nomination as the general-commander of the armed forces, and his promotion to lieutenant-general, the most senior military rank, which only Hafez al-Assad had held. The same day, Bashar al-Assad was unanimously nominated for presidency by the Baath Party, with no other nominees. Over the next couple of weeks, Mustafa Tlass made a number of public statements expressing the security establishment's acceptance of Bashar al-Assad as its new chief-commander. On the 24th of June, Bashar al-Assad was elected the secretary-general of the Baath Party. The parliament quickly amended Article 83 of the constitution on the age of the president of the republic, from 40 years old to 34

years old, the exact age of Bashar al-Assad. Three days later, the parliament voted in agreement with the Baath Party nomination. In a subsequent nationwide referendum, in which virtually the entire Syrian electorate took part, Bashar al-Assad received 97.29 percent of the total vote (99.7 percent of valid ballots cast), which was slightly less than the 99 percent which his father had regularly received. According to the minister of the interior, of the 8.690.000 votes cast, only 22.439 voted 'no'. On 17 July 2000, Bashar al-Assad took the constitutional oath and delivered his inauguration speech. His seven-year term began, at the end of which he said he would like to hold presidential elections rather than just a referendum (Lesch, 2005: 4, 81).

None of the hypothetical scenarios of succession were realised. Rifaat al-Assad did not emerge as rallying point for senior Alawite barons such as Ali Duba, Muhammad al-Khuli and Ali Haydar[83] (Gabrill, 2000). An insignificant number in the military, along with other powerful figures in the country, viewed Rifaat al-Assad as the best alternative who would maintain the status quo. Rifaat al-Assad had built an independent base of power among a network of connections across the state and society. It included Alawite, bourgeoisie and middle-class professional clients. He built strategies in the Muslim world through multiple marriages to various powerful families, some of which were opponents of the regime, such as the Lebanese Maronite and the Saudis. His basis of power was mainly in the military and the Baath Party, but he was also supported by a

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[83] Revise chapter III.

propaganda to appear as an alternative rightist, pro-Western, pro-bourgeois, and opposed to the dominant thrust of the Baath Party (Hinnebusch, 2002).

The nomination of Bashar al-Assad reflected a meeting point of the plutocracy, the family, the Baath Party and the parliament with no hint of opposition to succession. An underlying agreement between Bashar al-Assad and the key pillars of the plutocracy facilitated a smooth transition. He needed the co-operation of senior officials in key power positions, in return, they needed legitimacy and the modern face that he represented (Leverett, 2005: 68). The fact that no one opposed the succession of Bashar al-Assad demonstrates two things: that the plutocracy at the top stuck together and would not risk a battle over the succession, and that Bashar al-Assad was the guardian of the continuity of the plutocracy (McHugo, 2014: 201).

The support of the plutocracy forestalled the possibility of any potential destabilisation that might threaten their privileges. They realised that if they did not hang together at the time of succession, they might end up hanging separately (Bronson, 2000). Continuity meant that there would be no fundamental changes made to the institutions, and that reforms were merely to carry out economic and political changes which would bolster that power (Lesch, 2005: 49-50). It meant the continuation of the privileges-for-loyalty policy as well as the carrot-and-stick theory of motivation. The social status of the aged plutocracy would remain intact. The privileges and franchises would pass to their families and the younger generation.

A review of the personal and political formation of Bashar al-Assad for succession suggests he was inclined towards reform in his approach to governance, but did not come to power with an elaborated vision for change. He has not inspired confidence in terms of his ability or even his willingness to actually implement reform beyond its mere promulgation, which was partially his fault, but also the fault of the inherent system (Lesch, 2013: 241; Ghadbian, 2001: 624-641). He needed help in laying out particular policies and integrating these policies into a comprehensive reform program (Daoudy, 2011: 29-31). Such assessment suggests that the pursuit of reform would be gradual and long-term. He was capable of thinking in a different way from his father, but was reluctant to put himself fundamentally at odds with his father's legacy or regime figures associated with that legacy. In his inauguration oath, he argued that his job was to simultaneously maintain his father's approach and to develop it as well. He noted, 'We are not coming to overthrow the reality but to develop it, and the word "develop" means that you are basing yourself on something and moving forward from it and not moving into vacuum.' (Leverett, 2005: 57-69).

The way Bashar al-Assad began economic, social and political reform suggested serious reform ambitions, and implications of a long-term strategic perspective (Leverett, 2005: 71). His constitutional oath and inauguration speech in Damascus on 17 July 2000 charted a new course for Syria, particularly in the economic and technological spheres. The speech was remarkably enlightened and went far to criticise certain policies of the past under his father. The frankness of his criticism of the previous system was unprecedented. He noted that the revival of the

institutions of civil society would achieve a balance between their role and that of the state in the context of a real partnership. His speech was promising. By Syrian standards, Bashar al-Assad was a breath of fresh air who could lead the country in a new direction[84] (SANA, 2000).

Bashar al-Assad's words about democratic thinking suggest he had an understanding of democracy as well as appreciation of the obstacles to building a democratic society in Syria. He pleaded for institutional thinking to build institutions and put the mentality of the state above the mentality of the tribe (McHugo, 2014: 204-205). His speech reflected awareness of the modernisation theories in social science that had emerged in the West after the Second World War (1939-1945). He noted, 'Progress and modernisation are not unilinear, as was once thought – it is a multilinear process where in each case the pace and type of modernisation reflects the history, culture, and experience of that particular country'. Nonetheless, his ideas regarding democracy were secondary to his thought on the need for modernisation and economic improvement, which could partially be explained by the dearth of debate on the perception and implementation of democracy among the ruling elite (Lesch, 2005: 82-83).

Bashar al-Assad showed interest in reform during the Damascus Spring. His treatment of Aref Dalilah, a former dean of the business school at Damascus University who was dismissed from his position in 1998 for criticising Mahmoud al-Zuabi for corruption, was a significant indicator. He honoured Dalilah in the

[84] Author's interview with Monia al-Saleh.

presidential palace, restored his faculty position, and named him a personal advisor on economic affairs. Bashar al-Assad took a number of steps to assuage concerns about political detention and abuse of the criminal justice system. He pardoned and released hundreds of political prisoners, including the MB affiliates, which was a significant, unique gesture in scope and scale. The state media discourse acknowledged for the first time the existence of political prisoners (George: 2003: 41). Bashar al-Assad carried out the closure of the notorious Mezzeh and Tadmor prisons where many political detainees had been held (Leverett, 2005: 90).

At first, Bashar al-Assad seemed truly interested in serious reform (Hass, 2013: 93). He preferred a gradual reform and development of civil society to consolidate his position. He redefined some outer limits for the scope and pace of reform (Leverett, 2005: 88-90). In his inauguration speech, he defined reform and modernisation as a priority. He acknowledged that the economic policy under his father had not been satisfactory. He emphasised the need to modernise the industrial base, activate and encourage the private sector, remove the bureaucratic obstacles to investment, increase job opportunities, qualify cadres, improve the education and expand information technology. He passed a series of laws and decrees to open up the economy, encourage private businesses and modernise administrative structure and education. Customs duties on imports for the local manufacturing industries were drastically cut, and restrictions on import and export were eased. A law made the possession or trading in foreign currency no longer punishable. A tax reform law was brought to the parliament to reduce the

tax rate while increasing the overall tax income. An agency to fight unemployment was established in support of the public sector to create employment and give loans to young graduates to set up their businesses. The establishment of private universities was permitted, and the Syrian Virtual University was created to connect students inside and outside the country to a worldwide network of higher education institutes. The most significant reform step was the issuance of a banking law in January 2001, which permitted the establishment of private banks for the first time since 1963 (Perthes, 2004: 32-33).

Nonetheless, laws on reform were reshaped through the executive laws to fit the plutocracy and boost their hegemony. Technocrat reformers were assigned to modernise Syria, implement administrative reforms in the ministries to which they were assigned, and examine the economic weakness of the Syrian system and devise ways to correct it. However, they were not able to enact political reforms or diminish the monopoly of power of the plutocracy, the Baath Party and the network of connections within the state institutions (Hass, 2013: 80).The difficulties which Bashar al-Assad faced in making real reforms were not separable from the bureaucracy which accumulated in the state institutions, army, security and the Baath Party (Abdulaziz, 2007). Bashar al-Assad has been receptive to new proposals, and welcoming new projects. Nonetheless, he soon retracted because reform would make him accountable to people on his tools of governance (Al-Arabiya, 2013). Decreasing corruption would reform the economy, but would be problematic because it was one of the most important rewards to loyal supporters,

and a tool to get rid of problem makers by selectively prosecuting them for corruption (Schneider, 2003: 230).

Leaked documents by Abdul Majeed Barakat[85] in 2012 revealed that the ASMC, Anisa Makhlouf (1930-2016) and Maher al-Assad provided Bashar al-Assad with advice which went beyond consultation, but was not binding. They shadowed him and focused on the dynamics of maintaining the regime. Bashar al-Assad was the representative and the public face of a 'quadrumvirate' who needed each other. Bashar al-Assad needed their support and advice, and they needed him to present to the people. He maintained his father's mechanism of decision-making. However, his policies were shaped by the advice of the quadrumvirate (Barakat, 2012; Al-Arabiya, 2012). The ASMC decided on crucial matters of rule, succession and dynamics of power. Anisa Makhlouf failed a coup attempt against Hafez al-Assad when he had a heart attack in 1984, empowered Bashar al-Assad for presidency in 2000, and would have a crucial role in 2011 (Lucas, 2016; Orient, 2015). Maher al-Assad was the commander of the Republican Guards, and played a significant role in shaping the response of the regime to the Damascus Spring and in talks on reform (Starr, 2012: 51).

Bashar al-Assad appreciated the risk of a rapid economic or political reform in society with unresolved ethnic and sectarian cleavages, a mainstream trend toward Islamisation within a Sunni Arab majority in an underdeveloped economy. This appreciation gave rise to a different model of reform. He described reform in

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[85] Secretary of the CMC, a cell founded in 2011 and headed by Hasan Turkmani to handle the revolt.

Syria as operating on three planes: economic, social and political. The three planes were not purely sequential. He argued that he could not work them together, and had to prioritise economic reform as the ground for social reform and subsequently political reform (Perthes, 2004). He feared that reform might change Syria into a USSR model under Gorbachev. He favoured a phased Chinese approach to reform that would not loosen the political system. It put economic modernisation ahead of political liberalisation, which would allow slow and gradual reforms to operate within the existing political system and save the risks of rapid changes. However, what Bashar al-Assad seemed to have adopted in practice was the Egyptian model of reform within the plutocracy, not the Chinese model. Some economic reforms, some political debate, and elections all took place within the framework of what remained to be an authoritarian regime (Schneider, 2003: 226-227).

In his explanation of the obstacles of reform through his inauguration speech and subsequent speeches, Bashar al-Assad identified democracy, economic reform and modernisation. He made economic reform a clear priority, and made it clear that Syria needed to modernise. He declared that bureaucracy had become a major obstacle to development, and admitted that economic progress had been uneven, mainly because of the state-dominated economy. He did not demonstrate a fully elaborated vision for reform. He addressed people not to depend on the state, because he did not have a magic wand. He concluded that authority without responsibility is the cause of chaos. He expressed his need for external assistance and support from the US to advance internal reform (SANA, 2000).

Bashar al-Assad noted that it would be impossible for Syria to become a Western-style democracy. Alternatively, he called for a democracy specific to Syria that takes its roots from its history and respects its society. He argued: 'We cannot apply democracy onto ourselves. Western democracy, for example, is the outcome of a long history that resulted in customs and traditions that distinguished the current culture of Western societies. In order to apply what they have, we have to live their history with all of its social significance. As this is obviously impossible, we have to have our democratic experience that is special to us and that is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality.' (Al-Thawra, 2000).

Bashar al-Assad argued that growing a uniquely Syrian form of democracy would take time. It would need plenty of consultation between a transparent guiding government and free-minded people (Tishreen, 2000). A genuine democracy which would be based on Syria's own culture and reflect the needs of its society, would allow plenty of ways to slow down or even abandon democracy. The public discourse was that the time was not yet right, or circumstances not appropriate. However, the acknowledgement of the obstacles facing the building of Syrian democracy was not necessarily cynical (McHugo, 2014: 206). Whatever the truth about Bashar al-Assad's conceptualisation of democracy, many Western governments and commentators sympathised with him, and wanted to give him the benefit of every possible doubt (McHugo, 2014: 207).

The regime feared that too much pressure towards democracy and activism would jeopardise the dynamics of power and the interests of the plutocracy (Lesch, 2005: 239). When asked in an interview on 31 May 2004 how long he wanted to be president, Bashar al-Assad replied: 'Till I have nothing left to give… or [with laughter] they do not want me anymore'. The lack of democratic institutions in Syria raised the question of who exactly 'they' were. It was unclear whether it referred to a civil society movement, Islamic opposition or other opposing groups inside or outside Syria, or to anyone at all as it would transpire in 2011 that his removal would be unpleasant.

Bashar al-Assad's marriage to Asma al-Akhras symbolised his encouragement of Sunni economic businesses within the outer frame of the plutocracy. She was the closest advisor on economic affairs in particular (Schneider, 2003: 230). She recommended most of the economic technocrats, inner circle and network such as Nabil Sukkar, who was one of the first experts from outside the government. He became the leading publicly tolerated critic of long-standing economic policies. Sukkar identified the Syrian economy as a rentier economy that had survived on oil revenues (Haddad, 2012) and aid from the GCC and military assistance (Haddad, 2005). Another influential figure was Ayman Abdel Nour, who was appointed a personal advisor on economic affairs. He created a web-based press service, All4Syria, as a forum for both Bashar al-Assad's critics and opponents in Syria and abroad that operated under the protection of the Republican Palace (Shadid, 2005).

The Damascus Spring

The year 2000 witnessed different levels of interaction between the conceptions of democracy and participation. These concepts were confronted by the development of plutocracy, and the restriction of the most important levels of participation in politics and economy. Theoretically, plutocracy was not developed in Syria, not even by the theorists who were engaged with the theories of democracy. Plutocracy emerged and developed as a phenomenon. Despite the illusions of the rhetoric by the institutions, plutocracy was not an idea on an ideological, theoretical or conceptual approach. It was an organisational move by certain actors, not necessarily built on ideology, sect or political belief. It was a mere quest and grab of power. The obscurity of the theoretical concept of plutocracy led to a problematic interaction with the concept of democracy. A clash occurred between democracy as a theoretical idea, and plutocracy as a power-driven cynical pragmatism.

The NGO movement in the Damascus Spring had been the most hopeful channel for promoting social and political reform in Syria (Leverett, 2005: 164). Civil society organisations and NGOs existed under Hafez al-Assad but were controlled and monitored by the state apparatus, and were utilised to bolster its power. The year 2000 witnessed the first manifestations of a viable civil society movement which was a result of the change in the head of the regime, and a popular desire for participation and sharing power (Abdulwahab, 2007). Political activism in the early days of Bashar al-Assad's tenure encouraged the emergence of Syria's first genuine civil society movement (George, 2003: 30-46). The movement started with

public forums reflecting the popular dissatisfaction with the economic, political, cultural and social affairs. It comprised Syrian intellectuals and commentators along with advocates of political reform in addition to ordinary people. The Syrian Economics Association, an official forum, met every Tuesday to discuss and evaluate the economic policies of the government. The Abu Zlam Forum for Civilizational Studies, and the Dumar Cultural Forum were informal forums that contributed to people's understanding of civil society, freedom of expression and accountability. Riad Seif and Aref Dalilah were elected to the seventh legislative term of the parliament (1999-2003), which boosted the revival of civil society movements. They called for the amendment of the electoral law, and the activation of the role of the parliament in accountability (Ziadeh, 2007: 11-12). Riad Seif and Michel Kilo called for national dialogue forums and civil society organisations. Seif critically questioned the performance of the government and the one-party policy. He sought the legislation of independent parties and criticised the monopoly of the Baath Party, corruption and the lack of transparency and accountability (Deeb, 2012: 727).

Civil society organisations and revival committees flourished during the Damascus Spring. [86] The national dialogue forums discussed the economic challenges towards democracy and civil society. The Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria, a leading unofficial human rights organisation, resumed its public activities (George, 2003: 121-124). A new human rights organisation, the Syrian Human Rights Committee, emerged under the

[86] Author's interview with Suheir Atasi.

leadership of Haythm al-Maleh, a Syrian lawyer and human rights activist (George: 2003: 41). The first manifestation of the revival of the civil society movement was briefly after Bashar al-Assad's inauguration with what became known as the Statement of 99, a manifesto for increased political participation by all segments of Syrian society. The statement argued that administrative, economic, and legal reforms cannot achieve their intended goals without a complementary political reform. The statement put the issue of political reform for public discussion, and was a test for the potentials of a real reform (Leverett, 2005: 91).

The first six months of Bashar al-Assad's tenure, known as the Damascus Spring, witnessed remarkable political openness which reflected on the intellectuals as well as the ordinary people. They witnessed general amnesties to political prisoners, the licensing of private newspapers, a fundamental change in the state-controlled media outlets, the provisions of political forums and salons in which open criticism was tolerated, and discarding the cult of personality that surrounded Hafez al-Assad (Lesch, 2005: 83). Bashar al-Assad instructed that his photos and statues along with those of his father should be withdrawn from the streets and public areas, and confined to state establishments. In February 2000, Ali Farzat, a reputed caricaturist and a friend of Bashar al-Assad, issued an anti-corruption magazine, *al-Domari,*[87] which was the first private magazine to be authorised since 1972. Editor in chief, Hakam Baba promised to dismiss the police from people's minds (Deeb, 2012).

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[87] Arabic word meaning 'the lamplighter'.

The Statement of 99, which characterised the Damascus Spring, was signed by 99 Syrian intellectuals including religious and ethnic minorities. It constituted a common ground for civil society movement and nationwide reconciliation. It demanded an end of the state of emergency and martial law, an amnesty for all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience and those who were pursued because of their political ideas, and allowed the return of all deportees and exiled citizens, the establishment of a state of law; the granting of public freedom; the recognition of political and intellectual pluralism, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, the liberation of public life from the restrictive laws, constraints and various forms of censorship imposed on it, so that citizens would be allowed to express their various interests within a framework of social harmony, peaceful coopetition and an institutional structure that would enable all to participate in the country's development and prosperity (Leverett, 2005: 204).

For the first time in decades, in a late response to the Damascus Spring, on 3 May 2001 the MB published a national honour charter for political work as a framework of co-operation with other opposition groups and to start a new era of national reconciliation (Deeb, 2012: 730). It declared its commitment to dialogue and the means and mechanisms of democratic political action, renouncing violence and working to protect human rights and the individual citizen. It welcomed religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism and acceptance of the others. The draft preliminary consisted of ideas for national dialogue. In August 2002 it developed into a conference in London for the Islamists, Marxists, Baathists, nationalists and independent Kurd, Christian and Alawite individuals who agreed on a national

charter. The charter called for a multi-party system, devolution of power, free elections and civil society organisations, however remained idle without a popular base (Al-Ahmad, 2005).

The Statement of 99 was moderate in its demands for freedom and call for a democratic change.[88] It sought alliance with the established order and reassurance of a gradual change from within. It appreciated the sensitivity and the difficulty of this step in a hegemonic system. It softened the language and did not breach a taboo or provoke security personnel. It was not an attempt to capture power, but to share it for a healthy society (Abdulwahab, 2007). The signatories were not punished, and the minister of information noted that the emergency law was frozen in practice. An unverified draft of the 'Statement of 1000' was leaked to the *al-Hayat* newspaper in January 2001 (Wikas, 2007: 5). It went far beyond the Statement of 99. It questioned the legitimacy of the transition of power, and called for a multiparty democracy, with an independent judiciary. It called for a reassessment of the NPF and its allied parties in the parliament. It concluded that the system was incapable of reforming itself and had to be confronted by a broad-based popular movement. Dalilah argued that one-party rule was no longer effective, and had to change if economic reform was genuine (Leverett, 2005: 92-93).

The Statement of 1000 marked a turning point in civil society experience. It posed a challenge to the fundamental pillars of the regime rather than testing the will of

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[88] Author's interview with George Sabra.

reform. Bashar al-Assad retracted and attributed the failure of the attempt to its method and to the regional context. He suggested an accumulative reform, while the civil society argued that accumulated bureaucracy and corruption needed fast and fundamental reform. He maintained that the regional context can only allow a mature reform that does not challenge the internal stability (Deeb, 2012: 721). Deeb (2012: 727) maintains that Bashar al-Assad only reverted when the social movement jeopardised the national security. The Damascus Spring ended almost as quickly as it began. By the summer of 2001, restrictions on political freedom were reappearing. Bashar al-Assad named it the Damascus Winter. The security apparatus resumed repression and arrested the signatories and other activists who continued to challenge the human rights violations and called for the building of civil society networks (Parot, 2012: 45-46; Habash, 2013).

Radwan Ziadeh,[89] a signatory of the Statement of 99, argued that the Damascus Spring was spurred by Bashar al-Assad himself to gain internal and external legitimacy through claims of reform, sharing power and fighting corruption.[90] It was to rehabilitate his regime in the media, and to polish his image, but was not a genuine desire to dispense with the old policies of suppression and the monopoly of power and wealth (Ziadeh, 2007; Abdulwahab, 2007). Abdul Razzak Eid, another signatory of the Statement of 99, argued that the civil society movement was born dead because of the lack of political and social internal prerequisites (Eid, 2009).

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[89] Head of the Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.
[90] Author's interview with Radwan Ziadeh.

The Statement of 99 was the outcome of a civil society movement. It was a moral commitment to fight because the regime would not tolerate reforms that would make a threat (Eid, 2009). Aref Dalilah, another signatory, argued that people as well as signatories were searching for a hope of reform. They had minimal expectations, and were prepared to accept a model of a just despot if that would launch social and economic reforms, despite such a model being paradoxical (Dalilah, 2012). While the Damascus Spring could be seen as a response by the people to plutocracy, the Damascus Winter could be seen as a response by the plutocracy to the popular movement.

Despite coming to an end, the Damascus Spring proved that the civil society is capable of leading the popular movement. Discussion forums, human rights organisations, and civil society groups appealed to the educated elite. They anchored the calls for democratic reforms and regime change. They indicated that there could be no change as long as Syria was governed by Article 8 of the Syrian constitution, which provided that the Baath Party was the leading party of the state and society. The Damascus Spring succeeded in breaching taboos, and touching a number of canonical doctrines of the Syrian political life. It cracked a wall of fear that wasbeing built since 1963 (Wikas, 2007: 11).

The civil society movement posed a social and political challenge to the plutocracy. Plutocrats cannot tolerate a civil society movement or an institution which is beyond their control. Invigorated civil society movement which was not controlled led to meetings which envisaged a national dialogue forum, and then led to a proposal for a political party that would also be uncontrolled; a party that would be

able to question the government and question the plutocracy. The acceptable borderline was crossed when Seif announced an independent party and bloc in the parliament. The Statement of 99 encouraged a considerable increase in civil society activism. The very expression of the Statement of 99 yielded the possibility of a civil society movement which has gone beyond control. The plutocracy could tolerate a discourse which did not threaten its control of institutions, but couldn't tolerate a discourse on legitimacy, multiplicity and independence (Eid, 2009).

Informal political forums and discussion groups spread in Damascus and other cities.[91] Some of these groups originated during the last few years of Hafez al-Assad's rule but their number, activity and independence increased significantly in the first year of Bashar al-Assad's rule. In 2001, four opposition trends crystallised: The MB, civil society intellectuals, Kurdish opposition and expatriate organisations. The response of democracy to plutocracy, the development of the elite and the reorganisation of the actors were through popular democratic movements in 2000, 2005 and 2011. While the Damascus Spring and other democratic attempts introduced concepts of reform and rights, plutocracy started to develop its own language, representation and response to present itself, not necessarily as a plutocracy, but as a legitimate democratic system (Ghadbian, 2001: 624-641).

Seeking liberties by the civil society was a precedent after four decades of the emergency law. Civil society groups advocated the rule of law, the independence

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[91] Author's interview with Louai Safi.

of the judiciary, and the abolition of special courts and the emergency law (Haddad, 2009: 545-547). The regime succeeded to appeal to hundreds of reformists and intellectuals who got additional allowances, positions and other privileges, and contained them by different means. Seif argued that the emergency law was used to oppress anyone who did not respect the established taboo: the president, the Assad family, the Baath Party, army, security, legitimacy and sectarianism (Lahn, 2006: 10-11). In 2000, Seif announced a parliamentary bloc of 21 independent parliamentarians, which was declined by the president of the parliament who prohibited political blocs other than the parties of the NPF. Mamoun al-Homsi, a parliamentarian, was prosecuted for criticising the performance of the security (George, 2003: 9-10). As a result, the activism of the civil society started to curtail between 2001 and 2002. The government began shutting down civil society forums. The *Al-Domari* newspaper was suspended. Ali Farzat was grabbed and beaten by masked gunmen who broke his hands and dumped him on a road outside Damascus. According to a leaked diplomatic cable, Farzat remembers the gunmen telling him: 'This is just a warning. We will break your hands so that you will stop drawing.' (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2013). Seif, al-Homsi, Dalilah as well as other prominent human rights activists were prosecuted. Freedom of media was still far from reach. Many of the authors ended up in prison. Despite the issuance of a media law, the NPF parties did not issue their own newspapers because of the strict conditions and instructions to reflect the official stances of the regime. The mentality did not change because most journalists were state officials and Baath Party affiliates (Allaf, 2005: 18-19).

The civil society movement was changing into a political state. Riad Seif was not the outcome of a political movement, and did not belong to any recognised classification such as communist, Baathist or Islamist. The CRCS, which he founded, was Syria's largest civil society formation. It was an unacceptable core for polarisation, and procedural linkage between people, the intellectuals and the political parties. The Statement of 99 was a revolution on the intellectual and political levels, which developed into the Statement of 1000 as a serious expression of popular demands. It emerged as an intellectual and spiritual need rather than a political agenda, which led to a change in the political discourse and became a guidance to the democratic movement (Eid, 2009)

The attitude of the security towards Aref Dalilah suggested a different attitude towards a threat by an Alawite, or a religious or ethnic minority. Defending the minorities was the source of legitimacy for the regime and the plutocracy. It could not tolerate a threat that would undermine such narrative or reflection that the civil society movement was not Islamist and was not extremist. The regime perceived a threat from the unprecedented alliance of Christians such as George Sabra and Michel Kilo, with Alawites such as Aref Dalilah and Fateh Jamous, with Islamic modernists such as Abdul Razzak Eid, along with the MB. The trial was considerably a retaliatory measure (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2006). While the signatories of the Statement of 99 were sentenced between two to five years, Dalilah was solely sentenced to ten years. However, while they were tortured in detention, Dalilah was not. Dalilah's sentence was doubled; one because he was against the regime, and most importantly because he was an Alawite. While in

prison, Dalilah's mother died. He was not allowed to attend the funeral, a case which he contrasted to a case in Israel. When in prison, and despite the hard line that he represented, Israel released Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi[92] to attend the funeral of his mother in Gaza without even filing an application (Dalilah, 2012).

Bashar al-Assad had to be selective in liberalisation and reform because if he were to liberalise too much or too quickly, that could undermine the public sector patronage system that helped maintain the regime in power (Dalilah, 2012). Engaging in too much reform and too quickly could lead to immediate economic instability and subsequent political unrest. Bashar al-Assad admitted that he wished there had been more reforms, but noted that Syria needed more time to build up institutions and improve education in order to absorb such levels of reform. He argued that reform could be counterproductive if society was not yet ready for it. He asked, 'Is it going to be a new era toward more chaos or more institutionalisation? That is the question.' (Lesch, 2013: 41). In an interview with Leverett, Bashar al-Assad had been clear about his determination not to move too quickly on political reform. He noted that moving too rapidly to democratise Syria would produce a result like Algeria in the early 1990s, where premature elections produced victory by presumably antidemocratic Islamist forces, prompting military intervention and the abrogation of the electoral outcome (Leverett, 2005: 71).

Social reform required an efficient civil society to mitigate sectarian identities, and to develop a more entrepreneurial private sector. Nonetheless, the birth of civil

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[92] Co-founder of Hamas.

society was challenging. Bashar al-Assad did not lift the emergency law. He postponed the introduction of a law on new political parties and the structure of the NPF. His closure of notorious prisons, release of thousands of political prisoners and waiver of the travel ban remained a reversible one-off step that did not reform the system or the decision-making mechanism. The security warned that reform had become the most serious challenge to the regime, and that if Bashar al-Assad continued on the path of political reform then they could not guarantee that he would remain in power (McHugo, 2014: 207).

The Damascus Spring stimulated the plutocracy for a counter attack on civil society. Abdul Halim Khaddam, in his capacity as the vice-president, discouraged the liberal approach (George, 2003: 36). He led the process of destroying the Damascus Spring, and warned that a six month deadline was over and there were fears from division in Syria and concerns of turning into another Algeria or Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, he acted in collective response of the plutocracy to demands for democracy (Parot, 2012: 45-46; Habash, 2012). In April 2001, Mustafa Tlass, in his capacity as the minister of defence, told Abu Dhabi satellite television that he had evidence providing that the intellectuals who signed the Statement of 1000 were agents of American intelligence (Leverett, 2005: 173).

Progress was slow, subject to setbacks and in some cases even reversals. No radical changes were marked in handling the domestic economic and political challenges. Bashar al-Assad's perception of time was different. He did not see himself caught in time, which might also be viewed as a strategic approach to time and process (Baidatz, 2001: 2). In his inauguration oath, he noted that there hadn't

been, nor would there be shock therapy for the Syrian economy, nor a rapid, wholesale opening of political progress (Leverett, 2005: 69-70). His attitude towards civil society remained one of the most controversial aspects of his tenure (Leverett, 2005: 88-90; Lesch, 2013: 241).

The response of democratic institutions to plutocracy

The parliament was a source of legitimacy for Bashar al-Assad, and a loyal apparatus subordinated to the plutocracy. The majority of the 250 MPs were Baath Party affiliates, economic or religious figures who represented the interests of the plutocracy in the parliament. The death of Hafez al-Assad tested the parliament. In 15 minutes, it amended Article 83 of the constitution on the age of the president from 40 years old to 34, the exact age of Bashar al-Assad without a popular referendum, and voted in favour of the nomination of Bashar al-Assad as secretary-general of the Baath Party in three seconds, which reflected its inefficiency, lack of independence and inability to preserve the constitution and to represent the people (Abdulwahab, 2007). Only very few MPs (such as Mamoun al-Homsi and Riad Seif) raised critical questions. In 2001, Seif criticised Makhlouf's monopoly of the mobile phone network, which deprived the state of 7 billion Syrian pounds, after which Seif was sentenced to five years in jail (Al-Aan, 2016).

The regime supported certain people as its choice for the parliament. It left 84 seats for independent candidates, most of whom were the wealthy (Becker, 2006: 65-91). The regime could also block the candidacy of any person who was not under the national fold, or might pose a threat (Habash, 2013). Independent

candidates normally came in groups of the same background to fortify each other and contribute to the success of the whole group. Each group was known by the name of the most prominent figure in it. A tradition was founded by the father and lived on with the son to dedicate a seat in the parliament to a selected religious figure for legitimacy, so that he would not appear in confrontation with religious institutions or the popular orientation. The selection of Marwan Shaykhu, a Kurd, as the spokesperson was in line with that tradition.

The first parliamentarian elections in the tenure of Bashar al-Assad were in 2003. Mohammad Habash, an MP, launched an initiative in 2003 which was personal rather than a general trend. He demanded the cancellation of the 1949 law on the execution of the MB affiliates, the cancellation of the emergency law, the release of the Damascus Spring detainees, and the establishment of a supreme council for human rights. Bashar al-Assad responded by developing the proposal into: founding a ministry for human rights, founding a parliamentary committee for human rights, and founding an independent committee for human rights. Emphasising to work gradually, Bashar al-Assad charged Habash with drafting these proposals to develop within the parliament (Habash, 2013).

Mohammad Habash was specialised in religious sciences and *dawah*.[93] He married the granddaughter of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro, the grand *mufti*, which along with the radio and TV shows he presented before 2003 made him a popular figure. In the 2003 parliamentarian elections, Habash was in a group supported by the regime,

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[93] Arabic word meaning 'the proselytising or peaching of Islam'.

known as Hamsho. Mohamad Hamsho is the brother-in-law of Maher al-Assad, and a financial actor of the Assad family with huge financial capabilities. It was a group of well-known figures with hope and intentions, but with no clear agenda of political activity (Al-Jazeera, 2012). Habash, as a religious youth, was chosen as a successor of Marwan Shaykhu who passed away in 2000 (Ziadeh, 2007). He was elected a member of the presidential office in the parliament, the same office where Shaykhu had been elected for five terms, which suggests that Habash was meant to play the same role in support of the regime and the plutocracy.

The initiative of Habash fit in the Islamic version of democracy. At the same time it did not endanger the regime or stability because it constructed a state-sponsored religion that would counter the MB. His version of renewal stressed dialogue, respect, and tolerance. It emphasised the difference between moderate Islam which is pro-reform, and radical Islam which is pro-violence. Habash claimed that he was able to make a change through his representation of religious institutions in the parliament as an independent MP.[94] He argued that his religious orientations, faith and beliefs were consistent with reform and openness outlined in the Damascus Spring. He perceived no contradiction between his Islamic project and the theoretical perspectives of the Baath Party and the Arab nationalism. The problem was not in theory, but in practice. Habash perceived the parliament as a platform for the opposites to work jointly to play one symphony. His project was a call for religious renewal and based on that Muslims are a nation among nations and not above nations, Islam is a religion among religions and not above religions,

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[94] Author's interview with Mohammad Habash.

Muhammad is a prophet among prophets and not over the prophets (Habash, 2013). However, Habash might have been encouraged by the plutocracy to hold cultural and social debates to spread moderate Islamic thought. He emerged as an important figure who could block the moves of an Islamic opposition, and bolster the regime (Wikas, 2007: 24)

The initiative of Habash warned of a potential increasing role of the religious institutions, which was a worrying imbalance in the dynamics of power. Habash was not the outcome of a political movement. He was a Sunni Arab figure, not from an ethnic or religious minority. Habash had large followers who believed in his project and rejection of the extremist ideology of the MB. His popularity increased through the grand *mufti*,[95] who was connected to the plutocracy as a reputed religious figure. His conceptualisation of a reform project based on a renovated, enlightened and modern Islam was welcomed by the sweeping majority of the Syrian people, who are religiously moderate. He argued that more threat comes from closure than openness. He argued that fair demands had to be met, and old files of human rights violations, prisoners, and the MB affiliates had to be closed. He warned that the security policies were leading to an internal explosion.

Bashar al-Assad soon retracted, and conveyed Habash a message via Mahmoud al-Abrash (1944-), the president of the parliament, that he embarrassed him, angered him and that he was exceeding the limits (Habash, 2013). Bashar al-Assad justified his decline of the initiative to the US invasion of Iraq. He argued that a

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[95] The grandfather of his wife.

human rights committee in the parliament would facilitate colonialism and imperialism. He conveyed Habash another message via Brigadier-General Ali Mamlouk that any talk about lifting the emergency law, or the cancellation of Article 8, or the law on parties should be postponed because of the confrontation with the American project and Israel. In a meeting for the Central Committee of the National Command of the Baath Party in 2007, Bashar al-Assad addressed the 92 members that Habash represented only himself and was speaking for himself (Habash, 2013).

The attitude of religious institutions towards the plutocracy was part of a standardised institutional relationship. Bashar al-Assad inherited a supressed popular religious stream, and an official loyal religious institution, which shifted the religious identity from cities to towns (Orient, 2016). Religious institutions were more propagandistic and bureaucratic than religious. Bashar al-Assad retained the status quo of religious institutions. Kuftaro, who was appointed by the Baath Party in 1964 to confront the MB, remained the grand *mufti* until he died in 2004. He came from an ethnic minority and from a minority school of Sunni jurisprudence. Importantly, this school argued against challenging the ruler, and maintained that Islam and *sultan*[96] are twin brothers. Kuftaro was disciplined with the regime's directions, and turned against Habash because of the reform initiative which he launched (Habash, 2013).

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[96] Arabic word meaning 'a Muslim sovereign'.

The initial years marked a retreat in the relationship between Bashar al-Assad and the religious institutions. Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929-2013), who was a religious advisor to Hafez al-Assad, complained that he never met with Bashar al-Assad for the first eight years of his rule (Habash, 2013). He distanced himself from the religious institutions and underestimated their importance in the dynamics of power. In 2002, he visited the Sufi sheikh of Zaidis, Osama al-Rifai, which was a precedent contrary to the tradition of the religious leaders visiting the president. The significance of the visit remained nil because it was not followed by further steps (Abu Rumman, 2013; McHugo, 2014: 218-219).

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 altered Bashar al-Assad's attitude towards the religious institutions, which failed to reach to people and to channel their religiosity in support of Bashar al-Assad's policies. He reshaped his relationship with the Islamists and allied with them to fortify his regional position. He used sheikh Abu al-Qaqaa and Mr Hahmoud Qulaghassi to mobilise people in 2003 against what he described as a foreign occupier who wants to exercise humiliation of Iraqi people. Abu al-Qaqaa was an important phenomenon in Aleppo. He was a man with a magnificent oratory capacity and with the extraordinary charisma and ability to mobilise people. Mosques in Aleppo trained people in karate and the use of arms. The regime aimed to complicate the situation in Iraq through sending hundreds of young *jihadists* to fight against the Americans, to convey a message that what the Americans suffer in Iraq would not be comparable to what they would suffer if they decided to invade Syria (Habash, 2013).

Al-Tayeb Tiziny[97] perceived the fall of Baghdad as a crucial moment when people started to see the reality clearly. The fact that the Iraqi regime had institutionalised a pattern of an impenetrable castle of tyranny that could not be infiltrated from within, led to infiltration occurring from without. In his name and the names of the Syrian intellectuals, he advised Bashar al-Assad to start opening this circle from inside before it was opened from outside by foreign forces. He explained that the Syrian regime held a rigid position in the relationship with the public at the time when the public was expecting crucial initiatives at all levels, or at least, at the political level being the main gateway into a true and comprehensive national democratic reform (Cihrs, 2005).

Conclusion

A small group of the wealthy continued to control the society and monopolise political and economic opportunities between 2000-2005. The era witnessed a remarkable change in the development of plutocracy. It was characterised by the controversial death of Mahmoud al-Zuabi in 2000. The Makhloufs, the Khaddams and the Tlasses remained on a solid foundation for a transactional approach to power. A split started to emerge between people's perception of democracy which was a combination of accumulated history, tradition and religion, and a new type of regime where the power is concentrated in the hands of a few of the wealthiest. Popular leverage failed to face the plutocracy. While it was becoming more innate in the system, people were becoming more vulnerable. The class division became more remarkable, and people were losing their jobs. The rates of unemployment

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[97] Professor of philosophy in Damascus University and a luminary Syrian intellectual.

increased, which was accompanied by an increasing role of the plutocracy and the security to manage the political power and calls for greater democracy (Al-Aan, 2016).

People living under the line of poverty had sharply increased from 11% under Hafez al-Assad to 33% under Bashar al-Assad. People living with less than 2 USD a day made up almost half the population, with the plutocracy earning more than 70% of the GDP[98] (Neisa, 2014). Legislative, judicial and executive authorities and state institutions were to serve the plutocracy which controlled the society through a business network of connections and the deployment of power in the parliament, council of ministers, NPF and populist corporatism, with a remarkable decrease of the role of the Baath Party and religious institutions.

The era 2000-2005 ended without progress on two key fronts: economic development and a movement towards freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. The rule of the wealthy, economic self-interest and inequality were not addressed. The Damascus Spring identified the needs for social and political change. Nonetheless, plutocracy remained fundamental and intact, which bonded the Damascus Spring. Contestation politics came out of the reality of a plutocracy that was manoeuvring in juxtaposition with a civil society that was trying to emerge (Gerges, 2015: 127-153). The following chapter focuses on the development of the plutocracy between 2005-2011 and its interaction with the Damascus Declaration.

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[98] The United Nations defines 2 USD a day as the borderline of poverty (Neisa, 2014).

VI.   Chapter Five: The 2005 Damascus Declaration, and the Plutocracy

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the development of the plutocracy between 2005-2011 and its interaction with the Damascus Declaration. It claims that the plutocracy responded by effectively adapting to change. The adaptation was to create an institutional structure and support that could deal with the threat of a civil society movement. The year 2005 marked a change in the plutocracy, personality and actors. The Makhloufs and the Tlasses continued governing the society through their wealth. Abdul Halim Khaddam controversially announced his resignation on 5 June 2005 during the Baath Party conference after publicly criticising the regime, and left for France (Al-Jazeera, 2006).

The Damascus Declaration was a revival of the Damascus Spring spurred by the popular discontent over the regime's involvement in Lebanon and its conflict with the US over Iraq and Palestine. It demanded a multiparty democracy in Syria and called for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy and the equality of all citizens in a secular and sovereign Syria. Its importance stems less from its content and more from the fact that prominent thinkers and activists from across the ideological spectrum, as well as Kurdish parties, the CRCS, and the NDG signed it. The Damascus Declaration was the ground of consensus between Arab and

Kurdish parties within Syria and elements inside and outside Syria (Wikas, 2007: 7).

The interpretation of the Damascus Declaration passed through the questions of what type of challenge it posed to the regime and the plutocracy, and also the position of civil society in 2005. The Damascus Declaration was a statement of unity for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy. It was both a document which was referring to a general assertion of rights and reforms, and referring to specific elements and aspects of the Syrian political society. Significant catalysts contributed to the Damascus Declaration, most notably the assassination of Rafic al-Hariri in Lebanon, the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the US occupation of neighbouring Iraq, but there were also other catalysts at work in Syria such as the position of the Kurds, and the build-up of ten months of protest, in addition to the Tenth Regional Congress of the Baath Party in June 2005, which was a firm iteration of Syria's future.

The development of the plutocracy between 2005-2011

Plutocracy retained its figures and features and remained on a solid foundation of business networks in the state institutions and the Baath Party, with no remarkable changes. It was responding to the challenges and reacting flexibly, but not changing fundamentally. Like the Damascus Spring, the Damascus Declaration witnessed timid attempts of penetration of the plutocratic monopoly, which was not encouraged or welcomed, such as the creation of the first private sector internet service provider, Aya in 2006 (Corbin, 2007). The system of patrimonial

rewards that started under Hafez al-Assad to guarantee loyalty has created substantial barriers to the entry of any new potential rival to the existing plutocracy. The plutocracy persisted via adapting and developing flexibly through a business network of connection (Wikas, 2007: 33).

The Competition and Antitrust Law 7/2008 aimed to eliminate the monopoly of economic activities, and serve as an illustrative example of laws that purport to promote investments that bring added value. It was comparable to the Investment Law 10/1991 which aimed to liberate economic sectors from the public sector. It was a significant marker on the road from a planned to a market economy. It followed several new laws including a new commercial law, an incorporation law, and an arbitration law, replacing old ones dating to 1949. All were designed to open the way for private investment, including foreign investment, and to bring Syria into line with international legal and business practices. However, the problem was not in the law, but in the authority that observes and upholds it. The plutocracy voided it through manipulation and corruption. Jihad Yazigi[99] noted that the law was as good and modern as any equivalent law in another country, yet its implementation remained the key issue. The plutocracy would completely control the 13-member Competition Council that would serve as they pleased and monitor the law's implementation (Haddad, 2012; Landis: 2008).

The socioeconomics of Syria reflected on the development of the social movement and the number of declared activists, which was barely in the thousands. The call

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[99] Editor of *The Syria Report*.

for reform did not address the economic and financial concerns, which remained paramount. The call for political freedom was met with humble political activism and failed to rally a population whose main focus was a higher standard of living and greater opportunities. A wall of fear, and a silent majority shaped political activism (HRW, 2010). The repression of the MB and the presence of the military and intelligence and the virtual inability to criticise the regime buttressed this wall which prevented the majority from opposing the regime. In a country where the average government employee earns 200 USD a month and citizens frequently hold two or three different jobs, and the nature of bureaucracy makes opening a private business nearly impossible, corruption has become the currency of the regime. Neither democracy nor freedom of expression were on the majority's priority list. The average Syrian, according to a professor of entrepreneurship at Qalamoun University, had become completely inured to think about economic stability and not taking risks in his life or career (Wikas, 2007: 14-16).

Youth political activism was hindered for three main reasons. First, most Syrians in their late teens and early twenties, if unable to travel, are mainly interested in completing their education, finding a secure job, and raising a family. They are not interested in politics, and do not want to engage in activities that would get them, their friends, or their loved ones in trouble. Second, the opposition did not develop plans for engaging youths and how to stimulate a generation inculcated with fear, ignorance and apathy in a repressive environment. Third, and most importantly, is that involving youths in civil society activities remains a threat to the regime and the plutocracy (Sayigh, 2013). They shut down forums and youth activities,

claiming that they were corrupting the younger generation, and kept the educational system of the Baath indoctrination.

The Tenth Regional Congress of the Baath Party in June 2005 was among the motivations of the Damascus Declaration. The Baath Party restored its position, but the regime could no longer be seen as officially committed to Baathism in its entirety, but rather to its own survival. On the first day of the Congress, Bashar al-Assad noted, 'We believe that the ideas and teachings of the party are still relevant and current and respond to the interests of people and the nation. Where their implementation has fallen short, it is individuals who bear responsibility, not the idea or ideology.' (SANA, 2005). These notes were inconsistent with those he made in 2004, when he said that the Baath ideology no longer matters. He humorously noted, 'If it contributes to prosperity in Syria, we can call it socialism.' (Al-Thawra, 2004).

The Congress was a firm iteration of Syria's future: commitment to the Baath Party, stability and economic reforms without political reforms. Civil society activists perceived the Congress as a new beginning of a new chapter in repression. While the Congress was being convened in Damascus, the police used tear gas to disperse a demonstration in Qamishli, in which hundreds of Kurds had gathered to protest the killing of prominent Kurdish cleric Muhammad Mashuq Khaznawi, which was widely blamed on the regime. Khaznawi was the deputy of Mohammad Habash in the Centre for Islamic Studies and was critical of the Baath Party policies. His meeting with the MB Ali Sadereddine Bayanouni in February 2005 was

believed to be the reason for the murder as the regime feared he could energise Kurdish and Muslim sentiments (Wikas, 2007: 14-17).

The religious institutions enjoyed new powers and influences as the regime recruited them to counterbalance the MB's enhanced popularity and fame after it joined the NSF founded by Abdul Halim Khaddam following his defection in 2006. As the MB allied with an ex-plutocrat, the regime was keen on balancing with the loyal religious institutions. On 5 April 2006, Michael Slackman[100] noted that Syrian officials were aggressively silencing domestic political opposition while accommodating religious conservatives to shore up support across the country. The regime sought to fortify its position via exploiting the sweeping surge among Arab nations of religious identification and growing desire to empower religious political movements, such as Hamas and the MB (Landis, 2006).

The plutocracy created its own Islamic movement and used it in support of the regime. It has sought to bolster and fund a soft Islam as a counterweight to the MB and Salafists. It has promoted an interfaith dialogue with a 'can't-we-just-get-along' brand of Islam. It has permitted the religious institutions a broad latitude in cultural affairs so long as they stayed out of politics (Al-Attar, 2012; BBC, 2006). It heavily relied on pro-regime clerics such as sheikh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti, who enjoyed respect and estimation in the religious community for his scholarship and academic competence. He taught in the Faculty of Islamic Law at Damascus University since 1960. He had been clear and consistent in his

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[100] American journalist for *The New York Times*.

suspicions of civil society and regime critics, considering them agents of anti-Islamic forces. In a lecture in 2005, he criticised the civil society for intending to sow dissension that will lead to an internal revolution aided by foreign forces. His rhetoric linked opposition with foreign forces that strived to destroy internal unity. Al-Buti's notes gave the regime a religious legitimacy and helped it contain the Islamic trends and the Damascus Declaration (Wikas, 2007: 25).

Islam was an important part of the mix with nationalism and anti-Americanism to manage the *jihadists* who were against the US policies in the region. Populism was the only leverage in Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy. He needed to face the problem of bringing Islam into the old nationalist slogans while immunising the inside from the risks of Islamism. He made alliances with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran in order to bolster his foreign policy and use the anti-American forces to shore up his position in the region. However, these alliances were all with Islamist groups outside Syria. Inside, he was minimising Islamism and dedicating it to selected loyalists to keep moderated Muslims from joining the opposition.[101]

Indoctrination to fight in Iraq could only be carried out by Sunni religious institutions. Baathism or Alawism could not mobilise insurgency because they are secular ideologies, which explains the absence of Alawism from the religious institution, and reasserts the need to counterbalance the MB enhanced popularity at the same time. The plutocracy had gone further than before to accommodate religious conservatives for two main reasons: the popular trend, and the external

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[101] Author's interview with Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib.

pressure. It appointed a sheikh, not a Baath Party affiliate, as a minister of religious affairs. It allowed, for the first time, religious activities to take place in the stadium at Damascus University, and permitted a speech emphasising religious practices and identity to be delivered to a military audience. Bashar al-Assad also inserted references to religious identity and culture into his recent speeches. The government reversed its decision a month after trying to limit activities at mosques to prayer only. As Abdul Qader al-Kittani[102] noted, before, religion for the regime was like a ball of fire. Now they deal with it like it could be a ball of light (Landis, 2006).

Mohammad Habash[103] argued that despite the restrictions, Syria was a far more relaxed place than it had been five years previously, when he would not even have been allowed to meet with a foreign reporter. He praised the accommodations to religion and noted that the regime realised the need of an Islamic power, especially at this time. He endorsed the ban on travel to political conferences abroad, which the regime reactivated in response to the Damascus Spring. He noted that it was not a suitable time to allow people to travel abroad to participate in opposition conferences, and that we had to be real (Landis, 2006). These notes are inconsistent with those he made in the parliament in 2003 about a reform initiative (Habash, 2013), and could have been to flirt with the regime after being dismissed from his official position.

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[102] Professor of Islamic Studies at Fattah Islamic University.
[103] Revise chapter IV.

Abduallah Dardari, deputy prime minister for economic affairs between 2005-2011, assumed the role which Adib Mayaleh[104] played between 2000-2005 as a governor of the Central Bank of Syria and later as a minister of economy and foreign trade (Haji, 2008). Dardari, the son of a senior military officer, was rehabilitated to support the plutocracy and consolidate the regime. He issued ad hoc decisions to facilitate a continued monopoly of the plutocracy and governance of the society through their wealth and companies. He facilitated networking between the plutocracy and the state institutions, while Baathism did not appeal to him as a secular non-Baath. His economic policies were blamed for causing the economic problems, and were considered among the reasons that contributed to the eruption of the revolution in 2011 (Aksalser, 2017), as will be discussed in the following chapter.

In 2005, the plutocracy declared support for a transition to a social-market economy. According to Nabil Sukkar,[105] the effects of Investment Law 10/1991 were widening. The GDP witnessed a growth of 6-6.5%. Sukkar noted that the US sanctions were far from having the desired effect of crippling the Syrian economy (Corbin, 2011: 25-46). While sanctions undoubtedly affected the country, one of the main reasons for lacking the capacity to reform the economic sector was that it conflicted with the personal interest of the plutocracy. Intensified sanctions, such as those placed by the US in February 2006 on the assets of Rami Makhlouf, have had little real impact on the plutocracy they were intended to weaken. Rami

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[104] Revise chapter IV.
[105] Former World Bank and current CEO of the Syrian Consultation Firm for Business and Development in Damascus.

Makhlouf has no known assets in the US. Ultimately, the effect of the sanctions has been largely symbolic, without having a tangible impact on the ground. An isolation policy of the plutocracy would not work unless Europe, Russia, China and Turkey agreed to multilateral sanctions, or to engage the regime with discussions on human rights. Verbal condemnation of behaviour with inefficient sanctions would be counterproductive, and would only lead to growing disregard of external pressures (Grace, 2008: 3).

The Makhlouf, Khaddam and Tlass families remained the controllers of society through their powerful companies and transactional approach to power after 2005 with no remarkable changes till the defection of Abdul Halim Khaddam. The Khaddams have made a fortune in the food-processing business over the last several decades. Food-processing in Syria has a competitive advantage over other Middle Eastern countries in large part due to the vast farming industry and favourable climate. The Tlasses have held a virtual stranglehold over the entire telecommunication sector throughout the years of the Assad rule. Telecommunications is particularly an important area for the economy to meet the demands of the hyper-information age.

The Damascus Declaration of Syrian Opposition Figures

On 16 October 2005 Syrian opposition figures issued a statement of unity known as the Damascus Declaration. It criticised the regime as authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish, and demanded a multiparty democracy in Syria. It called for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy and the equality of all citizens in a secular

and sovereign Syria as well as peaceful and gradual reform founded on accord, and based on dialogue and recognition of the others (Carnegie, 2012). It criticised the regime's policies towards Lebanon and called for a new social contract, pluralism, rule of law and peaceful transfer of power. It called for a just democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, in a manner that guarantees the complete equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens, with regard to nationality rights, culture, learning the national language, and other constitutional rights (Gunter, 2014). The declaration viewed the establishment of a democratic national regime as the basic approach to the plan for change and political reform. It called for the rejection of totalitarian thought and serving all plans of exclusion, custodianship and extirpation. It rejected violence in exercising political action. The declaration aimed to function as a social contract of a political system that would lead to a modern democratic constitution that makes citizenship the criterion of affiliation, the peaceful transition of power, and the rule of law in a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights and are obliged with the same duties (Cihrs, 2005).

Significant events contributed to the development of the Damascus Declaration through presenting grave international challenges to the regime, most notably, the Kurdish cause, the assassination of Rafic al-Hariri, the US occupation of neighbouring Iraq, and the Tenth Regional Congress of the Baath Party in June 2005. Syrian Kurds suddenly emerged as potential players in democratic societal life, which tipped the dynamics of power and altered the ethno-religious minority alliance. Many Kurds have been denied Syrian citizenship (HRW, 2009). Decree 93/1962 noted the Arab belt to create an artificial cordon sanitaire of Syrian Arabs

between the Syrian Kurds and the Turkish or Iraqi Kurds to excise from the Syrian body politics what the Baath leaders described as the cancerous Kurdish tumour. The decree classified 120.000 Kurds as foreigners who could not vote, own a property or work for the government. This status has been inherited and thus the number may now exceed 300.000. In addition, more than 75.000 Syrian Kurds became known as concealed, which deprived them of any civil rights, and became worse than being foreigners. Another decree in 1992 prohibited the registration of children with Kurdish first names, and banned Kurdish cultural centres, bookshops and similar activities.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in March 2003 and the recognition of Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous province encouraged the Syrian Kurds to challenge the regime and the plutocracy. On 12 March 2004, a riot broke out at a football match in Qamishli between the fans of the local Kurdish team and Sunni Arab fans from Dayr al-Zur to the south. Demonstrations in Qamishli, which the Kurds consider the capital of Western Kurdistan, sparked other Kurdish areas in Hama, Aleppo and Damascus. Angry rioters destroyed the statutes of Hafez al-Assad as well as a number of government structures, and facilities owned by the plutocracy such as the Makhlouf-owned SyriaTel and crony capitalists such as the Hamsho-owned Bourak telecommunication companies. Riots escalated while the security forces responded and prevailed. The relation between the regime and the Kurds remained tense, and was renewed a year later in Aleppo after blaming the regime for the killing of Maashouq al-Khaznawi (Gunter, 2014).

Toppling the statues of Hafez al-Assad was a symbolic significant act reminiscent of what had happened to the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad less than a year before. It was a strong precedent in a state where the regime, the ruling family and the plutocracy were inviolable. The Kurdish public rebellion led to the emergence of Kurdish self-awareness and pride that marked a definite turning point in the Kurdish existence in Syria, and was a momentous event that the Kurds could subsequently rally. The protest movement was the first event that united all the Kurds in Syria and reflected the solidarity of the Kurds in neighbouring Iraq and Turkey to set a Kurdish identity (Gunter, 2004).

National and regional challenges accompanied the declaration. On 20 October 2005, the UN investigation on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri, led by German judge Detlev Mehlis, concluded the assassination could not have taken place without the knowledge of top ranked Syrian intelligence and security officials (Wikas, 2007: 8). The strong UNSCR response to the Mehlis report on apparent Syrian involvement in the assassination forced the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon after three decades of hegemony. The long-serving Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam broke with Bashar al-Assad and accused him of being involved in the assassination of al-Hariri, and allied with the reviving MB (Gunter, 2014). As Syria remained under the US sanctions, its oil reserves dwindled, the Lebanese market started to shrink and Iraq remained in a state of chaos. Iran remained the only means of support. In order to cope with the new stance, Syria resumed hosting and supporting non-state armed groups such

as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and allocated them offices in Damascus (Corbin, 2007).

The significance of the declaration emanates from the timing, the nature of the powers that participated in its creation, and the nature of its signatories. Anticipating the issuance of the Mehlis report on the assassination of al-Hariri reflected that it was a national pact that deterred the accusations that the opposition was attempting to exploit the weakness of the regime (Wikas, 2007).The main importance of the declaration is the identity of the signatory parties and individuals. The declaration was signed by more than 250 major opposition figures as well as religious and secular, Arab and Kurdish parties. Five parties and gatherings, namely the Democratic National Gathering, [106] the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, the Democratic Kurdish Alliance in Syria, the Democratic Kurdish Front, and the Future Party signed the original document, in addition to nine prominent figures. The MB soon joined and called on others to sign the declaration, which it described as a starting point for a new national consensus. Other smaller groups and individuals, both within and outside Syria joined the Damascus Declaration, most notably the Reform Party of Syria, headed by Farid Ghadry, which was based in the US (Sammour, 2005). Abdul Razzak Eid drafted the declaration, Michel Kilo launched it and Riad Seif was the first signatory. Major figures included sheikh Jawdat Said, a pacifist Sunni theologian, and Nawaf al-Bashir, a tribal leader from Deir Ez-Zor. The Damascus Declaration was characterised by the recurrence of the same democracy activists

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[106] Composed of five leftist and nationalist parties.

and signatories of the Statement of 99 in 2000, which would also recur in 2011 (Wright, 2008: 232-234; Landis, 2006).

Seif argued for a democracy with Syrian values based on Western democratic experience and the French Revolution. Noting that each country must have its own version of democracy, he pointed to the Spanish model as one which was particularly appropriate for Syria, because of its similarities. Spain witnessed a transition to democracy following the end of Franco's long-term authoritarian regime between 1939-1975. Seif conceptualised a Syrian version of democracy that did not make use of what he called 'hyphenated democracies diluted by Marxist, Nasserist, or Islamist ideology'. His conceptualisation was followed up by plans to launch a new political party which was meant to be broad-based and allow both secularists and conservative Muslims. The party, however, would not use secular or liberal terminology, which might discourage people who might potentially share similar political goals. Introducing himself as a clean, uncorrupted politician and a Sunni businessman from Damascus, Seif claimed he and his party could appeal to the average people, and lead the transition to democracy (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2006).

The chief signatory powers represented the enduring differences in the political field. Fayez Sara, one of the drafters of the Damascus Declaration, perceived it as an open text for different groups and persons to express their views. The drafters left the door open for introducing structural amendments to the declaration. The drafters expressed readiness to introduce substantial amendments in response to

the discussions that were underway among the concerned groups. Sara promised that the declaration would take into consideration and respond to different declarations that were made and publicised in reaction to the Damascus Declaration, whether approving or disapproving. Likewise, the Damascus Declaration would examine carefully all the comments and would perform executive amendments. A provisional committee was commissioned to monitor the declaration and carry out a constructive dialogue with other parties, whether those were willing to adopt the declaration or only wished to submit their comments on it (Cihrs, 2005).

Because of the variation in economic ideologies among the Damascus Declaration activists – Marxist, communist, socialist, capitalist, liberal, Islamist and all shades in between, they avoided a discussion of economic issues in order to reach consensus (Wikas, 2007: 16). The declaration significantly gathered different ideological signatories from right to left. Anas al-Abda, a signatory, viewed the Damascus Declaration as a national project for freedom, and serving as a coalition between the political parties. It encompassed different political parties, ideologies and independent individuals. It benefited from their different societal experiences without nulling their identity or existence. It did not enforce a mandatory formula on signatories. It was not a fusion, but a coalition of political parties, civil society organisations, independent individuals and activists to promote what they hold in common, and disregard differences (Al-Abda, 2009).

The Damascus Declaration gained importance as an emboldened domestic Syrian opposition consisting of disparate groups such as the MB and the communists, and the engagement of the MB with secular groups (Gunter, 2014). It was a challenge to reconcile the demands of the leftist and the secular parties with those of the Islamists in an attempt to unite the fractured Syrian opposition. The alienation of the MB from the Damascus Declaration began when it joined the NSF, founded by former Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam, following his defection in 2006. Elections for the command of the Damascus Declaration in 2007 reflected irreconcilable differences between the traditional opposition of leftist and nationalist factions on the one side, and the new opposition which was a melange of the Damascus Spring era factions and the Islamists on the other (Carnegie, 2012).

The circumstances around the making of the declaration were challenging. It was made in a tense political atmosphere with an accelerated tempo about six months before. In their endeavour to attain reform, civil society as well as different political groups had to surmount a number of formidable obstructions by the regime in every step they had to take. The regime warned that talk on reform should be postponed amid external pressures. Grave developments had taken place in the region. There was a predicament in Lebanon and another in Iraq, and an exacerbating dilemma with Turkey, in addition to a political problem with the US and subsequently with the European Union. Radwan Ziadeh perceived that external pressures required a potent and healthy structure, which would not be accomplished unless the civil society undertook a process of build-up (Cihrs, 2005).

Jawdat Said criticised the powers of small elite of the wealthy, controlling the politics and monopolising the businesses and privileges. He joined the declaration because of its non-violent approach to sharing power. He rejected any negative or positive relation between the external challenges and the declaration. He perceived the declaration as a step towards democracy that had priority over any other internal or external issues. Repression of democratic attempts cannot be justified on the basis of US or Israeli pressure, because democracy means dignity. Said even encouraged the Baath Party to reform itself and join the declaration to become a model of voluntary sharing of power (Said, 2009). A responsible party would not force the opposition to recourse to violence, which would result in a confrontation that would eventually expel democracy.

The Damascus Declaration, however, faced a severe backlash. The first criticism came from the nationalists who claimed that there is an attenuation of the Syrian national and Arab policies. However, the declaration reiterated the importance of belonging to the Arab system, and distinguished between Nationalism and Arabism. The drafters argued that nationalism as an ideology has already collapsed, whereas Arabism built on democracy and human rights was still appropriate in its national and democratic changing role. The second criticism was on its attitude towards the Kurdish issue. However, a number of Kurdish parties were among the signatories to the declaration, including the Kurdish Democratic Alliance and the Kurdish Democratic Front. The declaration emphasised the significance of finding a fair democratic solution for the Kurdish issue but at the same time safeguarding the unity of people and the country on the basis of

absolute equality. The third criticism was on its attitude towards religious minorities. However, the declaration accentuated the essentiality of preserving the rights of all minorities and the role of these minorities in realising the aspired change. It called for utter respect for citizenship rights as a main principal in the social contract among all components of the Syrian people (Cihrs, 2005).

Aktham Neisa[107] did not wish to downplay the declaration, however he expressed concerns that the declaration could have been tailored under the influence of the international investigation committee into the assassination of al-Hariri, and the fact that the Syrian regime was on the brink of collapse. He argued that the declaration created a crucial dynamic spirt to make the minorities feel that it represented only the signatories, rather than the Syrian society at large. He noted that the minorities felt that if the declaration makers managed to accede to power, they would remain excluded and oppressed. Neisa argued that the declaration had sectarian overtones, which raised the concern that its provisions might lead to religious sectarian tension. Neisa perceived the provision on Islam as the religion and ideology of the majority a violation of the fundamental human rights of freedom of belief, and a suggestion that the Islamic ideology would prevail over the next regime. It also suggested that no other ideology would be tolerated beside Islam. Despite affirming respect for all other beliefs, the declaration carried the 'we and them' discourse. It implied that the nation would be made by the 'we', with only marginal contribution of 'they'. The declaration presented rights that the Kurds already had, and never mentioned what it would give to them, thus it seemed

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[107] Chairman of the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Syria, and an Alawite.

to be a kind of political nihilism. It called all opposition forces to come together under its umbrella, which deprived benefitting from the long individual histories under oppression, under the single roof, the single party and the single leader. Neisa criticised the declaration's denial of change from the outside. He argued that change would not happen without the intervention of external powers, when civil society was unable to effect a change, and the regime was unable to give concessions to achieve reforms and change. He concluded that the declaration was designed to be taken as a package, but its tailors could still modify it if they wanted to (Cihrs, 2005).

Ghassan Mufleh, a signatory of the declaration, perceived it as a successful moment of consensus, and the minimal in common among the political, democratic and national forces. Nonetheless, he criticised the lack of a reference to gender equality. He considered the article on Islam a reflection of a reserved attitude towards the other constituents of the society. Christians and other religious minorities, per se, were not part of the culture, which is confiscated in the declaration through a Sunni version of Islam. He argued that the declaration cannot unify people or make a step towards democracy as long as it is built on religion. Mufleh warned the declaration may lead to a future sectarianism and tyranny of the majority, while he disagreed with the excessive fear of the minorities from dealing with the MB (Mufleh, 2005).

Wael al-Sawah, a Syrian political analyst, perceived the declaration as headlines that were drafted to appeal to more signatories. Its calls for a democratic national

change were unclear whether this was to be presidential or parliamentarian. It focused on future political change without providing a future economic vision. It did not focus on the social dimension. It discussed the elections, constitution and parties without referring to poverty, education, culture, children or gender. Its calls for a shift from a security state to a political state did not represent people's aspirations for a civil state and equality. He argued that there should not be a reference to Islam to assure the other religions that citizenry is the basis of equality and rights (Al-Sawah, 2005). He perceived the article on Islam as a bribe to the MB and other Islamic forces to sign the declaration and to seek power in the name of democracy. He argued that the article on Islam was a result of politicising Islam while depoliticising the other religions, and an expression of the failure of the declaration to separate between power and religion. He raised the question why the declaration did not separate between religion and the state, which is a major principal of democracy. Islam, he argued, should be in mosques and can guide how people and the society behave, but should not run the state institutions. He viewed the declaration as a reflection of the restricted understanding of democracy as mere elections. He argued that democracy should also be based on modernity, secularity and separation between political power and religion (Al-Sawah, 2005).

Al-Tayeb Tiziny considered the declaration a pre-emptive attempt to control the situation, and emphasised that only democratic reform can bring safe harbour. The declaration was a response to the monopoly of the political power, and the monopoly of wealth, through which Syrian funds were stolen and sent abroad. He argued that people only desire a settlement of three matters: financial sufficiency,

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freedom, and dignity, none of which were addressed. The negligence of people's desires provoked their negative emotions, which the regime failed to realise and recognise. He, however, noted that the declaration confused between Islam as a belief system and Islam as a political system. He argued that in such political context, it should have been better to discuss political Islam rather than discussing religious ideology. In disagreement with Neisa, Tiziny argued against external intervention, and encouraged a build-up from within. He maintained that no single religion should be favoured over another, and proposed a secular model to regulate the relationship between political power and religions. He suggested two main steps for reform: the first was to observe the international legitimacy, and the second was to engage in a national democratic reform to realise national conciliation (Cihrs, 2005).

In response to Neisa's concerns, Radwan Ziadeh argued that the declaration should be read with a will to co-operate to effect. All parties signatory to the declaration stressed that the Kurds were part of the Syrian fabric. He affirmed that phrase on Islam as the religion of the majority was clearly out of place because it is well-known that the Arabs are highly religious by nature[108] (Akif Kayapinar, 2008: 375-407). It is thus pointless to highlight it in an elitist declaration. Fayez Sara argued that the declaration was not a holy scripture, and there were certain mechanisms to work on it, including mandating delegation to hold dialogues with all Syrian forces about the contents of the declaration, and to welcome other

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[108] Revise chapter II.

declarations which would strengthen the Damascus Declaration via discussing the controversial issues (Cihrs, 2005).

Despite its shortcomings, the declaration launched dynamism among all parties at all levels. Despite the criticism, it launched a definite mechanism, or course of action, among all Syrian components highlighting the call for practical thinking in the process of change. It produced deeper and more far-reaching repercussions than its predecessors, which created a dialogue and initiated vitality and dynamism. The declaration did not give final solutions, rather it highlighted the challenges Syria faced and it attempted to motivate the internal situation in order to strike an internal balance to help the opposition forces develop their powers to chart the future (Cihrs, 2005).

The declaration became the largest opposition gathering since the Baath Party assumed power in 1963. A broad coalition was built on the prospects of change in Syria (Rasas, 2013). Said Lahdo [109] considered the declaration as the best representation of the characteristics and aspirations of the Syrian society with its different cultural, intellectual, religious and political tendencies. It was an ideal formula and a core which, if developed, would create a divergent, yet a viable developmental civil society (Lahdo, 2009). It was a common ground for an unanticipated broad understanding between the main body of the Syrian opposition and a majority of Kurdish parties; between secular parties and the MB. Groups and individuals from across Syria's social spectrum, whether religious,

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[109] Syrian historian and political analyst.

ethnic or sectarian, agreed to join their efforts in a struggle for democratic change at a critical moment of Syrian history (Sammour, 2005).

The United Nations Economic and Social Council noted the Damascus Declaration in its Resolution 2005/50, and the role of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in the achievement of the international development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration (United Nations Digital Library, 2005). The resolution affirmed the importance of increasing economic growth and linking that growth to the formulation of strategies for the eradication of poverty and unemployment and the achievement of social integration, with a view to realising the internationally agreed development goals by adopting the general policies necessary in respect of employment generation, social security, the improvement of living conditions, combating corruption and the strengthening of accountability (ECOSOC, 2005).

Cracks began to appear in the declaration. On the one hand there was the liberal trend represented by the People's Party, the seven Kurdish parties signatory to the declaration, and the majority of independent figures. On the other, there was the Socialist Union Party and the Party of Communist Action which rejected the wager of the liberal-Kurdish parties on the external factor of internal change. The split was deepened by the MB decision in June 2006 to form the NSF with former Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam after he split from the regime, but did not formally abandon the Damascus Declaration. These two developments lost the declaration its wide representative base, and it became effectively confined to the liberal and

Kurdish parties and figures. It lost its Nasserist and Marxist components in addition to the disengagement of the Islamists. The MB official exit came in January 2009, when it announced the suspension of its opposition activities during the war on Gaza (Rasas, 2013).

Unlike the Damascus Spring, the Damascus Declaration was characterised by organisation. The declaration was followed up by a temporary committee to oversee continued coordination among its signatories (Landis, 2006: 55). According to a leaked diplomatic cable, two years after signing the declaration in October 2005, 163 civil society, human rights, and opposition leaders met at Riad Seif's home and voted for the creation of a legislative body and a national council. On 4 December 2007, the council released a declaration and focused on peaceful democratic reforms. Seif noted that the major obstacle to agreement on a national council came from the Arab Socialist Democratic Party and the Communist Action Party, both of which had endorsed the original Damascus Declaration in October 2005. Leaders of these parties had insisted on denouncing the US policies in the region and on stipulating support for Arab nationalism, a position that had alienated the Kurds and some pro-reform moderate Islamists. Seif explained that Hasan Abdul Azim and Safwan Akkash had both agreed to postpone debate on the council's platform and declaration until after the election of its five-member presidency and the 14-member secretariat. Akkash and Abdul Azim campaigned for the position of council chairman, while Seif agreed to drop his name from the ballot. Seif argued that the two radicals cancelled each other out. A moderate woman, Fida al-Hawrani was elected, and Seif was elected the head of the

secretariat with overwhelming support (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2007; Atour, 2007).

The council focused on diversity among the leadership. Fida al-Hawrani, chairwoman of the presidency, and daughter of former Syrian populist Akram al-Hawrani, was a political moderate from Aleppo. Abdul Hamid Darwish, first vice-chairman, was the leader of the progressive Kurdish Party. Abdul Aziz al-Khayer, second vice-chairman, was a former Communist Action Party leader who spent 20 years in jail for his political activities. Akram al-Bunni, first secretary, was a former Communist Action Party leader, a writer and a journalist who spent years in jail for his political ideas. Ahmad Tahmeh, second secretary, was a moderate Islamist, connected to the London-based Justice and Reconstruction Movement (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2007; Atour, 2007).

President George W. Bush applauded the formation of the national council of the Damascus Declaration, in a statement he made on 14 December 2007. He noted, 'The brave men and women who formed this council reflect the desire of the majority of Syrian people to live in freedom, democracy, and peace, both at home and alongside their neighbours in the region'. He viewed the formation of the national council as an encouraging sign to all people who support freedom and democracy. He announced his support to the national council's principles of nonviolent struggle and open membership to all the people of Syria who believe the time has come for change. He called the regime for an immediate release of prisoners of conscience and the MPs (Bush, 2007).

Michael Corbin, the Chargé d'Affaires of the US in Damascus between 2003-2006, viewed the national council as a major victory for Riad Seif and the liberal wing. He noted, 'We expect no press coverage by government controlled Syrian media and do not rule out government arrests of leading activists'. He argued that the establishment of the national council was a representation of a major step forward for an opposition movement stymied by internal debate in an organisation that barely functioned on the basis of consensus (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2007; Atour, 2007). The following section tests the significance of the Damascus Declaration, and the response of the plutocracy.

The response of the plutocracy to the Damascus Declaration

Bashar al-Assad's first response was to issue a decree on 3 November 2005, granting amnesty to 190 Syrian political prisoners, coinciding with the Muslim festival of *Eid al-Fitr*, which signals the end of the holy month of Ramadan. According to SANA, the pardon was part of a comprehensive reform policy aimed at strengthening national unity, and one of a series of similar steps taken in recent years to strengthen the internal front and firmly establish national dialogue. SANA noted that the other measures would be taken to demonstrate that the homeland has room for all. The majority of freed prisoners were associated with human rights or Islamist groups. Absent from the list were any of the six remaining Damascus Spring detainees, including Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsi. Additionally, 300 political prisoners were still held, along with 100 Kurds (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2005).

In a speech he made on 10 November 2005, Bashar al-Assad threatened to deal firmly with unpatriotic people with connections to the outside. The speech was an emotional appeal to Syrian patriotic and religious sentiments, which made a huge impact on public opinion both on the street and among the elite, and overshadowed the Mehlis report development. A cable leaked in November 2005 noted that the speech was rough in places, especially the language on Lebanon, but it largely elicited a positive, emotional Syrian response. An eye-witness reported seeing Syrians burst into tears of emotional agreement with Bashar al-Assad's statement that he would only bow his head to God. The moment at the podium was used to forge the link between the regime and people by appealing to the sentiments of patriotism and pointing out the threats to Syria's dignity and security (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2005).

Bashar al-Assad further responded by referring to a conceptual variation in the notion of democracy. In his public interviews, he asserted 'our' democracy, and demonstrated a good knowledge of the academic and ontological recognition in Western democracies and disciplines. He advocated that we adopt and apply what suits us best, and you apply what suits you best. He explained that we cannot apply democracy of others onto ourselves, because Western democracy is the outcome of a long history that resulted in customs and traditions that distinguished the current culture of Western societies. We cannot apply what they have because we cannot live their history. We have our democratic experience that is special to us, and that is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality (Tishreen, 2005).

Abdul Halim Khaddam's defection and the formation of the NSF was a big blow to the regime and the plutocracy's confidence as was the Damascus Declaration. The fact that the NSF formation had not fractured the opposition gave the declaration a cohesive force. Khaddam possessed a wealth of important connections, and an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the regime. He issued an open letter to the Baath Party affiliates, appealing to them to reject loyalty to the small family clique and elite of the wealthy ruling Syria and to give their loyalty to the fatherland, which the NSF claimed to represent (Landis, 2006: 59). His notes on the declaration are inconsistent with those he made in 2001 as an architect of the Damascus Winter crackdown expressing fears from divisions in Syria and concerns of turning into another Algeria or Yugoslavia. The alliance showed a move in the MB from ideology to prioritise political pragmatism. It reflected strengthening ties and connections between the domestic opposition and the NSF of Khaddam and Bayanouni (Wikas, 2007: 9). The alliance enhanced their standing within society in a complementary benefit. The MB gave Abdul Halim Khaddam its Islamic imprimatur and support within Syria, and it benefitted from his international and internal connections (Landis, 2006: 58).

Following the crackdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001, the regime and the plutocracy became more sensitive to any threat. They denied signatories a voice in media, and demanded civil society figures to stop giving interviews to the foreign press and meeting with diplomats. In mid-March 2005, the Ministry of Information yanked licenses from the US sponsored channel al-Hurra and Radio Sawa because they covered a protest in front of the Ministry of Justice (Landis, 2006: 57). The

Damascus Declaration website, www.damdec.org was blocked in Syria. The distribution of the declaration was banned, rendering support for it difficult and dangerous. In light of public fear of retaliation against political activism, an ordinary Syrian would fear to print a copy of the declaration or use a proxy to download it from the internet. Additionally, only a small segment of Syrians had internet access. Travel bans and security clearance were imposed on the signatories as well as political and human right activists. Riad Seif was denied a passport following his release from prison in 2006. The ban reflected the threat and the fear of communication between activists inside and outside Syria (Wikas, 2007: 15-16). Corruption, which was the subject of different state campaigns, became again a risky topic. The regime adopted a particular policy of arrests, releasing one only to detain two more, days later, or the same activist was detained again to maintain a constant level of pressure (Landis, 2006: 60).

The declaration posed a serious threat to the regime. Unlike the Statement of 99, and the Statement of 1000, which were signed by individuals, the declaration carried the imprimatur of political groupings. Although it was an imperfect document, it was the basis upon which national coordination between groupings began. The stepping down of Mehlis as chief investigator in December 2005 gave the regime and the plutocracy renewed confidence to continue its campaign of silencing the declaration. In March 2006, the regime released a statement warning human rights activists and Syrian opposition members that communication with the US was considered a red line (Wikas, 2007: 9). Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari, charged with steering the economic overhaul, noted in an interview: 'The

survival of this regime and the stability of this country were threatened out loud and openly. There were invitations for foreign armies to come and invade Syria. So you could expect sometimes an overreaction, or a reaction, so something that is really happening.' (Slackman, 2006).

Bashar al-Assad argued that the price of disunity and dissent, in the prevailing political crisis, would be chaos (SANA, 2005; Landis, 2006: 63). According to a diplomatic cable leaked in March 2009, he noted that the popular trend in the region was shifting in political alignment to the right, which rendered the process of reform increasingly difficult. He warned that rapid reform in countries such as Lebanon and Algeria had only caused more conflicts. Islamists in Algeria had tried to use a sudden political opening to gain power in the 1980s which sparked a conflict that lasted for 20 years. Similarly, Bashar al-Assad argued that the reform process in Lebanon and the 29 May elections had only caused the subsequent sectarian violence (Al-Thawra, 2006).

In response to US senior Senator Benjamin Louis Cardin that he could give specific examples of citizens jailed for their political views, Bashar al-Assad noted, 'We are a country in process of reform. We are not perfect. You are talking about 12 people out of 20.000.000. It is a process. We are moving forward, not fast, but methodically', in reference to the 12 members of the Damascus Declaration who were convicted in October 2008. They were sentenced to two and a half years, for their contact with an individual in Lebanon who had invited the US to attack Syria. Bashar al-Assad admitted that Syria had very strong security laws, but argued they

were necessary to protect the nation. He argued that human rights relate to the whole upgrading of society, and to the production of new laws. In a final note on human rights, he argued that he was a popular president and that if he were working against his people, he would not enjoy such popularity (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2009).

The threat of the Damascus Declaration went beyond political or economic reform or demands for greater democracy. Marwan Kabalan[110] noted that the declaration demonstrated to the world that a coherent alternative to Bashar al-Assad was emerging inside Syria. Anwar al-Bunni, a prominent human rights lawyer, noted that the regime wanted the world to believe that if it fell, only Islamists and radicals would come to replace them. He proclaimed that Syria needs the entire world to know that there is a replacement that is democratic and liberal. George Sabra, a signatory of the declaration, argued that Syria is not politically an empty shell.[111] There do exist popular forces in the country, with a long history of democratic struggle – trustworthy groups that can be dealt with. These forces were united, he argued, in their support of democratic and national change, and had a program that dovetailed with the spirit of modernity in this era of world history (Sammour, 2005). Joshua Landis[112] perceived the declaration as a message to the West that there is an alternative to Bashar al-Assad. He argued that the opposition needed to show the world that they were capable of real organisation, and to show Syrians

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[110] Damascus University political scientist.
[111] Author's interview with George Sabra.
[112] Expert in Syrian history at the University of Oklahoma.

that there was a third way and that they didn't have to choose between Bush and chaos (Zoepf, 2005).

A nationalistic response to the Damascus Declaration reinforced the portrayal of internal regime critics as accomplices of the West. In addition, the threatening external environment gave the regime a green light to crack down on civil society and democracy activists both inside and outside the country (Lesch, 2013: 15). Living for 26 months, the declaration ended on 9 December 2007, with a campaign that arrested 40 participants in a conference held few days earlier (Landis, 2007). In a sentencing session that barely lasted 20 minutes, the First and Second Damascus Criminal Court charged 12 activists with weakening national sentiment, and spreading false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country. HRW considered it evidence of repression of the opposition. Sarah Leah Whitson[113] noted that the trial was a mere cover to legitimise the government's repression of opposition groups and peaceful critics (HRW, 2008).

During a defence session on 24 September 2007, the 12 activists[114] made significant claims. Riad Seif: 'I am not optimistic for the judgement··· as I think that we are not being tried by this court, but by a power that relies on the state of emergency and rule of the wealthy'. Fida al-Hawrani: 'To end the state of emergency and the martial courts and to improve public freedom – especially freedom of expression – are necessary conditions to improve the living situation of

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[113] Middle East Director at HRW.
[114] Most of the 12 activists are signatories of the Damascus Spring or the Damascus Declaration. See appendix G.

the Syrian citizen'. Akram al-Bunni: 'I was tried for political reasons before. But this trial is different, because it is a trial of individuals who want to exercise their right to express their mind'. Ali al-Abdullah: 'Our arrest and trial are the best indication of the authorities' refusal of any peaceful and gradual reforms required to resolve Syria's problems'. Yasser al-Eiti: 'The right to freedom of expression is a sacred right, and to give it up is to give up one's humanity, and I defend my right and the right of any Syrian citizen in their freedom of expression'. Jabr al-Shufi: 'The heart of this case is whether the authorities will accept the culture of dialogue and recognise different opinions'. Ahmad Tomeh: 'It is difficult today to judge someone for his thoughts after democracy has become the way to determine people's opinions and ideas'. Walid al-Bunni: 'Getting into the details of my defence is useless, but I will ask: what is the basis of the accusations' ? Talal Abu Dan: 'This is a trial of thoughts and concepts more than a trial of individuals. I don't see that this court is trying me – rather it is trying every free mind in this country'. Muhammad Hajji Darwish: 'Even though I know that the court is not neutral, I say: any judgment is akin to a medal on my chest that I gift to my sons. Therefore I do not ask for clemency but for justice' (HRW, 2008).

A leaked cable in 2008 noted that the crackdown of the regime on the national council members put the Damascus Declaration under intense pressure. Its most prominent leaders were in prison and were facing a number of restrictions on access to their families, or ability to talk to their lawyers. Some had serious medical conditions, others were physically mistreated during the investigation at security detention centres. The council members were able to take only limited steps to

sustain the movement. Corbin argued that they needed some outside help to gain notoriety and potential support. He suggested to focus on the response and actions of the government and to issue strong statements when they occurred (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2008).

The Damascus Declaration contributed to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a statement of ten points signed by 500 Syrian and Lebanese activists and published on 12 May 2006. It called on the regime to recognise the independence and sovereignty of Lebanon, demarcate the borders and establish diplomatic relations. It also called for an end to political assassinations of Lebanese opposition. The signatories were the same activists of the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration including Michel Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni. The timing of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration was significant for both the signatories and the regime. It was published during the ongoing investigation into the assassination of al-Hariri, led by Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, which placed the regime under regional and international scrutiny. In addition, it was published briefly before the UNSCR 1680, which reiterated the need for a clear border between Syria and Lebanon, and the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty throughout all Lebanese territory (Wikas, 2007: 9).

The European Parliament resolution 2006/2150, containing its recommendation to the Council on the conclusion of a Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement between the European Community and Syria, called on the Syrian government to reconsider the cases of political prisoners of conscience and peace activists, and

to allow the existence of groups such as the signatories of the Damascus Declaration, and the signatories of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration. It called on the government to ensure that detained or imprisoned persons are well treated, not subjected to torture and given prompt, regular and unrestricted access to their lawyers, doctors and families. It encouraged the Syrian government to co-operate fully with the Lebanese Government to obtain concrete results in the cases of disappearances of Syrian and Lebanese nationals. It denounced the wave of arrests in response the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, being the first joint initiative by Syrian and Lebanese intellectual and human rights defenders. It called on the government to address the concerns of the European Union with regard to respecting the rights of religious and other minorities, and of the Kurds in particular, and to report on the state of progress with these issues. It urged the government to play a constructive role in the implementation of UNSCRs 1559/2004 and 1701/2006, and call on it specifically to step up controls on its side of the Syria-Lebanon border so as to prevent the supply of arms to non-state entities (European Union Library, 2006).

The Damascus-Beirut Declaration posed a threat to the regime (Wikas, 2007: VII), which called the timing of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration suspicious, and perceived the declaration as an accusation against the regime of the assassination of al-Hariri. The signatories were subject to persecution with accusations of violating sections 191, 192, 276, 287, 288 and 307 of the Criminal Code, which include acts such as: weakening national sentiment, arousing extremist ethnic or religious sentiment, publishing false or exaggerated news that might harm the

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honour or status of the state, condemning or insulting the president, the courts, the authorities, the military, the public administration, or an official discharging public governance of his duty or his work. Within a week, the regime made the largest number of arrests since its crackdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001. On 14 June 2006, Prime Minister Naji al-Otari sacked 17 signatories from their posts in the Ministries of Health, Education, Oil, Information and Agriculture without giving a reason (Varulkar, 2006). The signatories were sentenced to variant years of imprisonment. In a letter from prison in December 2006, Kilo wrote that his prime motivation for supporting the declaration was to anchor the Syrian-Lebanese relations on a firm foundation (Wikas, 2007: 9-10). The verdicts of imprisonment reflected the regime's perception of threat differently. While some opponents completed their entire sentences, others have been kept in jail past their release due dates with no tangible effect. The signatories promised that they would continue their political activism and would emerge again (BBC, 2009).

State media response came in the form of articles in the Syrian press attacking the text of the declaration and its signatories. On 17 May 2017, an editorial in *Tishreen* wrote that the government found itself obliged, in times of distress and of overcoming Syria's pressures, to rebuke a number of Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals who have forgotten all Syria's victims and sacrifices for the sake of Lebanon, and have joined the evil and open attack led by the American Administration against Syria. It emphasised the right of the government to do more than just rebuke these intellectuals who had not only ignored and forgotten what Syria has done for Lebanon in its times of distress and at the height of its tragedies,

but have even – 'oddly' – tried to blame Syria for the deterioration of the situation between the two countries. The article found it odd that these Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals issued a declaration in which they hinted that Syria is threatening Lebanon, and forgot about Israel and its destructive role, and unceasing aggression. The article considered the timing of the declaration suspicious while the American Administration was applying its malicious pressure on the Security Council so that it would pass a resolution demanding that Syria establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. Such a decision, the article viewed, was against the UN Charter and the international laws, and unprecedented in international relations. The article claimed that the regime still thinks that true nationalist intellectuals would understand the dimensions of the evil attack to which Syria was being subjected, and would stand in the trenches defending it positions and national and pan-Arab ideologies (Varulkar, 2006; Tishreen, 2006).

Another article in the same newspaper on 21 May 2006 wondered why the European Union and the West wanted, 'for strictly egotistical reasons', to stick their nose into Syria's internal affairs, and violate Syrian national sovereignty. It wondered why these highly influential European forces wanted to cause damage to Syria, its people, and its history in this vulgar way. It wondered why the West was more concerned than the government about democracy, human rights, and the international conventions. It asserted that Syria knows how to defend its national unity and the interests of its sons, and that the day will come when the West will stand and apologise to the Syrian people for what they have done to them, and for their service to Israel, which is the enemy of Syria, Lebanon and the

Arabs. It asserted that Syria will not bargain over its interests and principles. It will not disdain a single grain of its occupied lands, and difficult situations will only strengthen and immunise it. Syria does not need the interference of the West, and it knows what the West wants by these shameful acts (Varulkar, 2006; Tishreen, 2006). In response, Syrian journalists and human rights organisations published scathingly critical articles of the regime. They called on the international community to intervene in order to bring about the release of all political prisoners (Varulkar, 2006). Hasan Yusuf[115] opposed the detention of Syrian intellectuals who signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, although he did not agree with them. He argued that such release would silence the evil tongues at home and abroad. Yusuf noted that differences of the pen must be settled on paper (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2006).

The crackdown of the regime against the Damascus Declaration, the Damascus-Beirut Declaration as well as any other type of dissent, presented a dilemma for democracy as a unity actor. On the one hand, such declarations needed continued international support to have visibility with the Syrian public, on the other, too much international support might paint them as foreign agents. The national and regional circumstances suggested that the regime had no more reasons to worry about the declaration. It declared victory against Israel following the 2006 war in Lebanon, which boosted its confidence (Landis, 2006: 61). With so many of its top

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[115] Columnist in the government *Tishreen*.

members in prison, the declaration failed to sustain itself as a movement, and ended as quickly as it began (Public Library of US Diplomacy, 2008).

Despite coming to an end, the declaration challenged the regime and the plutocracy and called for a fundamental change. It anchored the calls for democratic reforms and indicated that there could be no change as long as Syria was governed by Article 8 of the Syrian constitution. It succeeded in breaching taboos and attacking a number of canonical doctrines. It managed to crack the wall of fear that has existed since 1963 (Wikas, 2007: 11). However, repression has prevented the development of a liberal alternative to the Baath ideology, and turned people increasingly to religious or sectarian identities. Yassin al-Haj Saleh[116] explained that when you press the parties, by all practical means, you are imprisoning the people in a framework of traditional or family-centric membership (Landis, 2006: 62).

Conclusion

The era between 2005-2011 witnessed a remarkable change in the development of plutocracy. It was characterised by the defection of Abdul Halim Khaddam in 2006. The Makhloufs and the Tlasses continued to control the society through their wealth and companies. They remained on a solid foundation of business networks in the state institutions and the Baath Party which restored its position after Bashar al-Assad realised the importance of its ideology in maintaining power. In tandem, the religious institutions were given new powers to support the regime

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[116] Syrian writer.

and the plutocracy, and counterbalance the enhanced popularity of the MB after it joined the NSF.

The Damascus Declaration posed a threat to the plutocracy. Different religious, ethnic and ideological groups from right to left found a common ground. Despite cleavage in the civil society and differences about their approach to particular political or religious issues, different groups and individuals came together to sign a declaration and agreed on the need of legitimate institutions. The threat of the declaration went beyond political or economic reform or demands for democracy. It demonstrated that a coherent alternative to Bashar al-Assad was emerging inside Syria. It was a message that the alternative to the regime is not vacuum of power, chaos, extremism, Islamism or the unknown (Sammour, 2005). The declaration was the basis of national coordination between different groupings from right to left, while enjoying outstanding popular support (Ghadban, 2005).

Despite the shortcomings, the Damascus Declaration launched dynamism among all parties and a definite mechanism towards the process of change. It resounded deeper and more far-reaching repercussions than its predecessors, which created a dialogue and initiated vitality and dynamism. It did not give final solutions, but highlighted the challenges Syria has faced and continued to face. It attempted to motivate the internal situation in order to strike an internal balance to help chart the future. It was the largest opposition gathering since 1963. It was a common ground and a critical moment of Syrian history for an unanticipated broad

understanding between the Syrian opposition, the Kurdish parties, secular parties and the MB.

The era between 2005-2011 ended without progress on two key fronts: economic development and a movement towards freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Plutocracy, the transactional approach to power, and the question of inequality were not addressed. Corruption was innate in the plutocracy, and meant that fighting corruption would jeopardise the plutocracy and ultimately the regime. The Damascus Declaration identified the needs for social and political change, nonetheless, plutocracy remained the fundamental challenge. The plutocracy was able to manage calls for greater democracy in the Damascus Declaration, and limit its gains because it had faced similar challenges in the Damascus Spring. The plutocracy adapted and repressed the civil society movement, which meant that there was no resolution after the crackdown on the Damascus Declaration. The following chapter argues that the year 2011 was different because of the challenge and changes in the internal and external context and condition.

VII.   Chapter Six: The 2011 Revolt, and the Survival of the Plutocracy

Introduction

This chapter argues that the year 2011 differs from the year 2000 and 2005 in the development of the plutocracy and the social movement, and their interaction and response. It differs because of the changes in the internal and external context, conditions and circumstances as well as the changes in the nature of the political and social groups. This chapter focuses on the development of the plutocracy between 2011-2018 and its interaction with the 2011 revolt. Given the severity of the challenge, the regime responded with denial, adaptation and repression. The year 2011 marked a change in the plutocracy's personality and actors. The Makhloufs continued governing the society through their wealth.[117] Mustafa Tlass controversially left for France for what he described as medical treatment (Oweis, 2012). Despite the emergence of foreign powers as key players in the Syrian dynamics, the plutocracy remained on a solid ground governing the society and the economy.

This chapter examines the evolution and adaptation of the plutocracy since 2011 along with the major key reasons that explain why and how 2011 was different. It argues that the revolt was an outcome of the interaction from external context with a longstanding internal context. Multiple internal and external social economic and political factors catalysed the 2011 revolt. Despite the economic situation,

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[117] See appendix A.

droughts and social media environment, the Arab Spring had a snowballing effect across the region and remains the major driver of the revolt. The catalyst was the external context combined with the media environment in which people learned about the Arab Spring, saw it and responded to it. The protest was the outcome of failure to get a resolution between the plutocracy and the people.

Adaptation was in some instances through making some changes and in other instances by the avoidance of change. It was in some ways by reform and the showing of legitimacy through figures and institutions testifying for it, such as the grand *mufti*, the Baath Party and a broad economic community of Aleppo manufacturers to move from the sectarian frame to the notion of cross-sectional support of Syrian society. Adaptation was also by different procedures such as propaganda declaring international legitimacy for the political and military approach to the conflict, and to paint the revolt with Islamism. With the development of the conflict, further adaptation was via seeking legitimacy from allies and supporters such as Russia and Iran rather than people. Repression was another type of response, and was based on a military and security approach.

The intensity of 2011 was beyond 2000 and 2005, which makes it the most critical moment that the regime and the plutocracy have faced in decades since the threat of the MB, not in terms of legitimacy, but in terms of survival. The response of the regime and the plutocracy was by adaptation and repression. However, given the difference in the external context, the intensity of criticism and contestation, the response to the 2011 revolt was more intense than in 2000 and 2005. While the

Arab Spring overthrew the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes, the survival of the Syrian regime raises the question of how Bashar al-Assad could manage the political power and calls for greater democracy, and how the regime held on to power despite the political resistance that lasted for years.

The development of the plutocracy between 2011-2018

The plutocracy in 2011 was different from 2000 and 2005 in structure and powers after more than a decade of evolution and adaptation. It was different because it was homogenous and complementary to each other, which made it secure and stable and altered any risks or challenges that might face it. In 2011, the plutocracy was at a point where it had been developed as a part of its base of support, and governance of the society. The plutocracy continued to be tied into the structure of the regime, and linked to institutions through a business network of connections, Alawism and the Baath Party. Despite the fact that these connections have been established for decades, there were still vulnerabilities, for example in terms of centralisation, exclusions and the structure of the plutocracy.

The complex network of relations between the power elite and fractions of the Sunni bourgeoisie has remained part of the regime's tool to dominate society and build loyalties among this sector. The plutocracy in 2011 was innate in the Syrian society, and continued to govern society through their wealth and companies. Unlike Mohammad Makhlouf who had been active since the 1970s, most of his successors did not have official positions. Appendix A[118] of the regime chart by the

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[118] Revise appendix A.

Washington Institute shows that the Makhloufs surround Bashar al-Assad and control the big national and international companies in Syria. The appendix suggests the existence of a transactional relationship between Bashar al-Assad and a small elite group of the wealthy surrounding him in a two-way complementary relationship for their won interest and the interest of the regime. The Makhloufs continued governing the society after 2011 with no remarkable changes after the defection of the Tlasses in 2012 because of the crackdown of the regime on their hometown in al-Rastan city in Homs (Tlass, 2012).

The failed democratic attempts of reform in 2000 and 2005 fortified the plutocracy. In response to the revolt, the regime warned that the alternative to stability would be chaos like in Iraq or Lebanon. The regime viewed that because of opposing the war on Iraq in 2003, and supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon in its war against Israel in 2006, and Hamas in 2008, it would be protected from the Arab Spring. However, these anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist credentials did not atone for the critical social and economic situation, rapid birth-rates and 300,000 annual new entrants into the job market in which only 8,000 were finding meaningful employment (Gunter, 2014).

The development of the plutocracy and their business networks of connections and privileges continued to centralise in certain locations such as Damascus and Aleppo. While this centralisation may be seen as a strength, it could be also seen as a vulnerability. The lower classes were not necessarily tied to business networks. A case to be made here is that away from the large cities, an entire

space has not felt the benefit of economic advantages, such as Daraa. These areas of exclusion, and other areas of rural component were the areas of tension.[119] The areas of exclusion did not develop with the development of the plutocracy, but at the same time were not part of a civil society. Nonetheless, when the protests started to develop into an uprising, people began to express issues that are of concern to civil society such as justice and a responsive regime to economic difficulties. The intersection between people and civil society raised the challenge of how the civil society would organise the social movement, and the intersection between people and the plutocracy raised the challenge on how the plutocracy would respond.[120]

Other weaknesses and vulnerabilities were related to the structure of the plutocracy. For example, the regime survived for decades by relying upon the central role of the Alawites in alliances and connections with other religious groups. It tried to enshrine this through the grand *mufti* and other Sunni religious figures. The potential tension is that no matter how these connections are emphasised, the exclusion of the Sunnis causes tension in terms of the regime claiming itself secular, and does not fit into the regime's claim of a secular state. While a secular state would allow for diversity and freedom of religions, the regime would not encourage that diversity.

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[119] Author's interview with Bashar al-Haj Ali.
[120] Author's interview with George Sabra.

Alawism is essential to the development of a plutocracy that secures their survival, but the regime cannot simplistically be described as Alawite. The Alawites play a central role in maintaining the stability and continuity of the regime. They constitute the largest religious minority in Syria, and are heavily represented in the army and security apparatus (Malley, 2011). While it is arguable that the fall of the regime would lead to a takeover by the extremists and to an economic decline (Steavenson, 2011; The Guardian, 2011), it is also arguable that this characterisation hardly corresponds to reality (Beck, 2011: 3). The composition of the social movement indicates diversity, rather than religiosity. It is multi-faceted and is comprised of different religions and sects as in the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration. Moreover, Islamist actors are in the rural areas of Syria, where traditional clans and tribes have the authority, not the MB (Ali, 2011).

The development of the social movement between 2011-2018

Externally, there was a change in the context of the region. People in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen took to the streets to demand freedom, justice and the fall of their repressive regimes. The catalyst for the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi. He was a university graduate, yet was unable to find a job (Whitaker, 2010). He was selling fruit at a roadside when his wares were confiscated by a municipal inspector on 17 December 2010. An hour later, he doused himself with gasoline and set himself afire (Hass, 2013). His death on 4 January 2011 brought various groups of unemployed, political and human rights activists, labour, unionists, students, professors, lawyers and others together to spark what became known as the Arab Spring. It marked a drastic

change in the context of the region and a quick collapse of long-ruling dictators. The Syrian regime strongly believed that Syria is different, and that nothing would even happen in Syria. Bashar al-Assad told *The Wall Street Journal* that, because he was close to his people, Syria was immune to the wave of protests sweeping through the region, toppling longstanding dictators along the way in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen and unrest in Bahrain (Starr, 2012: 5).

Internally, dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement were culminating the longstanding context. A series of social, economic and political factors included the growing poverty, the rapid economic liberalisation and the cancellation of state subsidies after 2005, a growing rural-urban divide, widespread corruption, rising unemployment, and severe drought between 2006 and 2010. A severe economic downturn was taking place and was causing significant deterioration in the economic condition. The liberalisation of the agricultural sector after the year 2000 led to a significant decrease in agricultural jobs. Estimates based on Syrian Labour force surveys showed that 460,000 active people stopped working in the agricultural sector between 2001 and 2007 representing a 33% decrease in jobs in this sector, and 10% of the total labour force. The cancellation of the subsidy on diesel fuel in May 2008 pushed prices up overnight. Farmers stopped irrigating their crops, and were unable to transport their produce to the market (De Châtel, 2014).

Media and analysts have suggested that droughts played an indirect role in the Arab Spring and the Syrian movement (Werrell, 2014), and thus do not provide a

full explanation of the revolt outside the context of the regional dynamics that swept over the region. Years of droughts increased poverty sharply and left many farmers helpless, without future prospects (International Crisis Group, 2011). While Hafez al-Assad supported the agricultural sector, Bashar al-Assad shifted to the policy of economic liberalisation, which mainly benefitted the private sector. The shift completely neglected the agricultural sector. Moreover, the plutocracy manipulated and reshaped the economic policies in a way that widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and the urban and rural. It failed to respond effectively and intervene on the agricultural crisis and currency stabilisation. It was unable to handle the natural resources of oil and gas, and did not address the problems of inflation, increase in prices and shortage of subsidies.

On top of internal and external factors were the political conditions inside Syria. Unrealised promises and extreme human rights abuse reflected that the regime lacked the political will to share power (International Crisis Group, 2011). The emergency laws in effect for more than five decades had suppressed democratic freedom (Gunter, 2014). Concentration of power in the hands of the plutocracy, lack of political freedom, insufficient transparency, unaccountability and inefficiency of state institutions raised questions over the political process and participation. However, the fundamental reason of the development of the social movement was the neglect of people's demands. The response of the regime in 2000 and 2005 demotivated the social movement to engage with the regime peacefully in 2011. These elements were connected and interrelated, making it difficult to identify any single cause as the definitive last straw that broke the

camel's back. As an outcome of these factors, the gap was widening between the plutocracy and people towards 2011. A third way option to give the regime another chance to reform itself was fading.

The year 2011 witnessed the rise of a massive social movement that was different from the civil society movement in 2000 and 2005 because the conditions and circumstances of the internal and external context were different. It was different because of the interaction from an external context with a longstanding internal context. The economic situation, droughts and social media provide an explanation; however, the regional context remains the primary driver of the 2011 movement. The Arab Spring had a snowballing effect across the region. It inspired people who were watching the collapse of long ruling authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other parts of the Middle East. It proved that people can revolt and can make a change. Despite the internal context, the development of the social movement in 2011 was mainly influenced by the success of the Arab Spring revolutions, which people saw as an historical opportunity to change their fortunes. The Arab Spring indirectly manifested the popular discontent and shaped the response of the social movement to repression.

The use of social media was among the most important differences and characteristics of the Arab Spring. The internet and social media inspired people and played a significant role because it facilitated communication and interaction among participants of political protests. Social media played a measurable role in gathering people to protest and spreading awareness on injustice in Arab societies

(Soengas, 2013). Protesters used social media to organise demonstrations, disseminate information about their activities, and raise local and global awareness of ongoing events (Salem, 2011). Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring (Howard, 2011). A study conducted by the Dubai School of Government analysed the various aspects of social media's impact on the Arab region, including the growth rate of Facebook and Twitter use, changes in internet traffic, and demographic changes over time, and came to a conclusion that social media played a critical role in mobilising, empowering, shaping opinions, and influencing change during the Arab Spring (Bebawi, 2014), which is a distinctive feature that influenced the demographics of the challenge in 2011. The impact of social media varied per country. Its impact on political processes was uneven. In some cases, governments used social media to engage with citizens and encourage their participation in government processes, while in others governments monitored internet traffic or blocked access to websites or the entire internet (Salem, 2011). While social networks played an important role in the rapid and relatively peaceful disintegration of the regime in Tunisia, they contributed to social and political mobilisation in Syria where a hacktivist group, named Syrian Electronic Army, was established in order to target and launch cyber-attacks against the political opposition and news websites (Clayton, 2013).

The 2011 movement was different because there was a significant difference between what could be called the community of protest and the community of challenge, in a different type of contentious politics. The detention of school children was a collective assault, and the response of the military security was an

offense against major tribal figures in Daraa who represented the community. It was a challenge to the community's sense of justice and law. [121] The unprecedented incident mobilised a sweeping social movement. While the active segment in 2000 and 2005 was several hundreds of defined mature intellectuals, academics, lawyers, artists and activists in defined forums and monitored meetings who did not represent the community in 2000 and 2005, it changed in 2011 into a movement of non-intellectual major tribal figures who represented the community. Therefore, the 2011 social movement was more challenging than the preceding civil society movements.

The interaction of multiple social and economic internal factors distinguished the 2011 revolt from the previous social movements. The social and economic grievances developed into specific political grievances, which Syria as a whole shared. The experiences of unemployment, frustration, discontent and grievances were preliminary steps for a mass action and a revolt in 2011. Joint grievances (David, 2010: 24) and living in acute and desperate conditions, such as the lack of affordable housing, widespread unemployment, inaccessible health care, extreme poverty, economic problems and corruption eventually triggered mass mobilisation. Social and economic stratification spurred grievances (Saleeby, 2012) and disappointment in the regime for failing to deliver what it promised a decade earlier. Economic liberalisation in the cities and suburbs gave opportunities for investments, which ultimately benefitted the plutocracy. Farmers and other

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[121] Author's interview with Bashar al-Haj Ali.

agricultural workers in rural areas lost their subsidies from the government. The wealth gap between the major cities and rural provinces continued to widen. Heavy droughts which began in 2006 and persisted over five years mobilised the neo-poor (Gelvin, 2012: 106-109) towards larger cities and towns in search of better conditions and work. This mobilisation also reflected the unbalanced distribution of state resources to develop cities, which exacerbated local grievances and existing tensions.

The 2011 social movement proved to be more successful in fighting for change, yet lacked the structures that could enable people to organise themselves and rally others (Abdulhamid, 2011). It was not capable of inciting a mass movement because of the adaptation and repression of the regime and the plutocracy which would never tolerate demonstrations and calls for greater democracy. The social movement had great difficulty reaching out and mobilising various kinds of support in the absence of a political context that allowed for the free and open expression of collective grievances and claims. The majority of the population would not mobilise, had the regime not seemed likely to fall. Much of the population were unwilling to face the security, risking themselves and their families. Repression made insignificant reforms unacceptable, yet made it difficult for many to engage. The opposition was fragmented, unclear and failed to present itself as a significantly viable alternative. Many feared that they would be in a worse position if the social movement succeeded in a regime change (Lesch 2013).

The catalyst of the 2011 social movement in Syria was the arrest of ten school children on the 6th of March for graffiti, painting 'Down with the system', a slogan that became popular during the Arab Spring (Hirst, 2011). The catalyst denotes the notion that many of the demonstrations focused on the grievances over local issues of the community, with no calls for Bashar al-Assad to step down. The use of system versus government served as a reference to the oppressive and wide-reaching security that spanned all levels of society.[122] It indicated more of a call for social justice and anti-corruption efforts, as opposed to calls for democratic governance.

By many accounts, Syria seemed one of the least likely states to develop a social movement against the regime. Earlier calls for demonstrations failed to mobilise a movement. Calls organised online, for protests on 3 February 2011, were met with severe repression (Lynch, 2012: 179). Calls on Facebook for 'a Day of Rage' on 4 February, failed to attract any protesters. There was heavy presence of security forces and police officers in front of the parliament, where the protesters were planning to stage their demonstrations (The New York Times, 2011). A combination of fear and lacklustre enthusiasm kept people at home (Noueihed, 2013: 226). A catalyst of a social movement occurred near Damascus's Souk al-Hamidiyah market on 17 February. A man was reportedly beaten and assaulted by traffic police, which led to a rapid gathering and mobilisation of protesters. The

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[122] Author's interview with Ayham al-Ebeid.

demonstration only ceased when the minister of the interior arrived and promised to make the officer in question accountable.[123]

The arrest of the school children served as a spark to a mass social movement, much like the self-immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia. The concerned families pressed for information about the detainment of their children and demanded their release. This culminated in hundreds of family members, relatives, friends and neighbours who took it to the streets to protest the repression on 12 March. While the focal point of the event was the children, the protestors also expressed other local grievances, calling for the removal of the governor and the head of military security branch. The security responded by opening fire on the crowd, killing several. During their funeral the following day, 20.000 demonstrators marched, chanting anti-government slogans and attacking various state buildings.[124] The same day, protests erupted in the northern city of Banias. Although unrelated, the movement was similar to the uprising in Daraa in addressing local grievances such as corruption and repression of the security. The protests in Banias began after a secular crackdown on a female school teacher wearing a veil. Other protests varied in size and outcomes. The protests were spontaneous and not the result of meticulous planning and preparation over years (Gelvin, 2012: 103). An internet call for a Family Vigil for Prisoners, a sit-in led by women, to be held across from the Ministry of the Interior on 16 March gathered 150 protestors (Castells, 2012: 100-101). The demonstrators were dragged by their hair and beaten by the

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[123] Author's interview with Hosam al-Hafez.
[124] Author's interview with Mohamad Haj Ali.

security. A sit-in in Daraa the following day was met with repression. On 18 March, demonstrations protesting the arrest and torture of school children in Daraa gathered with tens of thousands. Peaceful marches in Daraa were met with ammunition. The protestors would soon turn into rallies, spreading primarily at their onset to other smaller cities, and then would eventually reach major cities such as Homs, Hama and even Damascus (Sterling, 2012).

With the development of the social movement, a new level of organisational structure emerged with the diminution of the role of the civil society. The *tanseeqiat*[125] were locally organised coalitions or groups of people typically based on work or neighbourhood affiliation. Interestingly, the *tanseeqiat* remained somewhat distinct from other opposition groups due to their high youth membership, horizontal structure and non-ideological basis. Being organised locally, the *tanseeqiat* varied drastically in size, structure and effectiveness. The structure of the *tanseeqiat* boosted their ability to continue operating. The leaderless and decentralised character made total eradication impossible. The *Tanseeqiat* formed a loosely structured overarching group called the LCCs in order to network these groups effectively. They proved a fundamental role during the movement (Hokayem, 2013: 69). They collected information via mobile phones, disseminated information via social media, and coordinated various nationwide mobilisation efforts every Friday (Hokayem, 2013: 69).

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[125] Arabic word meaning 'coordinating groups'.

The *tanseeqiat* failed to create a collective identity because of their smaller localised nature and use of social media. A major challenge to the LCCs was that the internet is provided by the government, and the mobile provider is operated by the Makhloufs, which meant that the regime and the plutocracy could easily restrict, monitor and intercept communications (Noueihed, 2013: 45). The security engaged in extensive filtering, primarily targeting foreign news websites, political parties, Islamist groups, human rights and civil society organisations. Bloggers and online activists were arrested on charges of weakening national sentiment and publishing false information (BBC, 2012).

Analysing the nature of the protests suggests that the initial opposition consisted of four categories to which the regime responded differently, based on the level of their engagement in the challenge to the survival of the regime. First, spontaneous local peaceful crowds, which typically congregated over a specific grievance, often after Friday prayer. Second, various groups associated with the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration. Third, the *tanseeqiat* and LCCs. Fourth, the traditional opposition, including members of the Kurdish groups, political opposition and religious groups (Gelvin, 2012). Two other entities joined after the militarisation of the conflict: deserters from the military and other security forces, and transnational foreign fighters from surrounding areas. The traditional opposition groups, which included those involved in the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration, various Islamist organisations, and political groups, remained divided in ideology, strategy and goals (Gelvin 2012). The MB, the largest Islamist group in Syria, remained significantly weak and reluctant to enter the

opposition following its separation from the Damascus Declaration. Other groups remained unpopular among the population as well. The Kurds, although representing a significant portion of the prodemocracy movement, were unable to integrate into the opposition and remained fragmented among themselves. The Kurdish groups were cautious after the Damascus Declaration, and it took them over a year to join opposition (Khatib, 2014, 146).

The militarisation of the conflict in 2012 changed the internal context. It altered the binary identification of social movement versus the plutocracy, and shut down the space between them. The immediate escalation of violence, repression and crackdown strained activist attempts at peaceful nonviolence mobilisation of a social movement, and catalysed the revolt. The speech of Bashar al-Assad on 30 March, and his subsequent speech on 16 April offered no apologies or reforms. Instead, he blamed the unrest on radical elements that sought sedition. The lack of apologies, repression and the attitude of the parliament infuriated people (Lesch, 2013: 89). In response to the regime's repression and adaptation, the social movement moved beyond its initial demands of reform. Robert Ford[126] noted, 'I have seen no evidence yet in terms of hard changes on the ground that the Syrian government is willing to reform at anything like the speed demanded by the protestors. If it does not start moving with far greater alacrity, the street will wash them away' (Lynch, 2012: 186). The social movement developed into an armed struggle as a result of being caught between repression, inability to enact a change and exhausting peaceful attempts (Tarrow, 2011: 209). Repression by the security

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[126] US Ambassador to Syria.

attracted more supporters, some of whom were radical in goals and actions. The crackdown assisted the transition towards more radical elements by depriving the opposition of its most idealistic elements.

The response of the plutocracy to the 2011 revolt

The response of the plutocracy by adaptation was complementary to the response of the regime by repression, and was essential for the survival of the regime. The plutocracy materially assisted, sponsored, and provided financial and technological support for goods or services in support of the regime (US Department of the Treasury, 2011).[127] It ensured that assets in nearly all sectors were controlled by them in support of the regime (Miller, 2012). Adaptation was in some ways by reforms, or trying to show legitimacy through figures and institutions testifying for it, such as the grand *mufti*, the Baath Party and a broad economic community of Aleppo manufacturers, to move from the sectarian frame to the notion of a cross-sectional support of Syrian society. Adaptation was also by different procedures such as propaganda declaring international legitimacy for the political and military approach to the conflict, as a fight against terrorism, ISIS and *jihadist* groups. With the development of the conflict, further adaptation was via seeking legitimacy from allies and supporters such as the Russian and Iranian government, rather than from people. Repression was another type of response, and was based on a military and security approach.

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[127] The US sanctioned Mohammad Makhlouf on 1 December 2011 as Bashar al-Assad's primary economic advisor (US Department of the Treasury, 2011).

Unlike the 2000 and the 2005 elite and intellectual movements, the 2011 movement was a tribal local community revolt.[128] The response of the regime and the plutocracy was different after it had evolved, changed and adapted over a decade. A different type of contentious politics marked the harsher response of the plutocracy. The interaction and response of the plutocracy in 2011 was different from its response to the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration because of the context, nature of the challenge and the development of the plutocracy in structure and powers after more than a decade of evolution. The domino effect of the Arab Spring, the inspiration of social media and the different nature of the internal challenge provoked a harsher response. While in 2000 and 2005, the plutocracy was facing several hundreds of defined intellectuals and activists who were already under observation,[129] and whose forums were defined, surrounded and attended by the intelligence, in 2011 the plutocracy was in an open confrontation with non-intellectual quality of major tribal figures representing the community of Daraa. Consequently, the community of challenge in 2011 was wider than the community of protest, a case that is not comparable to the previous social movements. The difference in the shared notion of language between the intellectuals of the civil society and the tribal community resulted in different levels and methods of repression by the plutocracy, and in a different type of contentious politics.

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[128] Author's interview with Bashar al-Haj Ali.
[129] Author's interview with Suheir al-Atasi.

Bashar al-Assad refuted the applicability of the Tunisian or Egyptian paradigm of revolt onto Syria. He noted that the regime realised that the causes of the revolt in Tunisia and Egypt lay in the way wealth was distributed, not only in terms of corruption but also in terms of geographical distribution (SANA, 2011). He argued that this was something that they had tried to avoid, and they were calling for a fair distribution of development (Lesch, 2013: 81). As a result, he argued that the protests in Daraa could not be perceived as sparks (Starr, 2012: 3-4). In his speech on 30 March 2011, and his subsequent speech on 16 April, Bashar al-Assad analysed the revolt as the misconduct of some hallucinating gangs who would realise their mistakes and repent. He offered no apologies or reforms, and blamed the unrest on radical elements that sought sedition, and a conspiracy by international actors, most importantly Turkey and Qatar. He was constructivist[130] in his reading of the history of his father's suppression of the MB uprising in Hama in the 1980s, and also the Russian suppression of the separatists in Chechenia in the 1990s. However, the international climate has changed with globalisation and the emergence of human right organisations and intervention for humanitarian purposes, and toppling different regimes in the region.

Bashar al-Assad took advantage of the events to issue a series of reform laws (Tishreen, 2011), and at the same time to get rid of the old guard and others who opposed his military approach to the revolt, such as his Vice-President Farouk al-Sharaa, his Minster of Defence Major-General Ali Habib in August 2011, and his Assistant Secretary-General of the Baath Party's National Command Abduallah al-

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[130] Analysing his interaction between experiences and ideas.

Ahmar. He formed a committee of Syrian loyal experts from the loyal parties to rewrite the constitution and remove the controversial Article 8 from the constitution. He held a controlled referendum to approve it. He enacted a media law that would allow more freedom of expression and the establishment of new independent media outlets. He accepted the resignation of the government in March and proposed constitutional changes addressing the dominance of the Baath Party on political power in June (Lynch, 2012: 184). In July, Vice-President, Farouq al-Sharaa, in a conference for national reconciliation, outlined political reforms and legislation on parties. However, this adaptation proved inadequate in juxtaposition with the regime's systematic targeting of civilians and peaceful protestors with violence (Hokayem, 2013). These steps could not be seen as genuine because they rejected the deliberation of power to the newly legislated parties in accordance with the new constitution, and did not address the underlying repression by the military and the security (Sabra, 2018).[131]

The promised reforms could only be cosmetic. They were a manoeuvre to quench the revolt, and gain time.[132] Had the reforms been implemented, they would have altered the plutocracy through free elections, justice and equal distribution of power. Bashar al-Assad had been repeatedly warned about the risks of a true reform since the Damascus Spring. Interestingly, while it would be expected from the president to address his people in hard times, the statement on reform came from Rami Makhlouf, who was blamed for economic problems, corruption and

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[131] Author's interview with George Sabra.
[132] Author's interview with Ahmad al-Hariri.

unemployment (Al-Ebeid, 2018).[133] The statement indicated that he realised the harm his transactional approach to power had done to people. He announced that he was going to divest himself of his riches and devote the monies to helping the people. He promised to share his wealth with people and to launch non-profit projects to create job opportunities, provide decent housing and promote agricultural and industrial projects and investment. He promised to dedicate his wealth for the development of rural areas and remote villages. He promised that he would no longer engage in new profitable enterprises and that he would dedicate himself to charitable work and the welfare of people (Aawsat, 2011).

The promises of Rami Makhlouf were arguably not credible because he is a key person in the plutocracy in support of the regime. In his statement, he showed symptoms of fatigue and disorder as he was trying desperately to convince people that he was credible. After the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration, people were no longer in a mode of trusting the regime on reforms. An observer commented acidly that the statement of Rami Makhlouf was as implausible as Saddam Hussein suddenly deciding to repent and model his life on that of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Whether sincere or not, the conversion came too late (McHugo, 2014: 219).

Testimonials in support of the regime were an important part of adaptation (SANA, 2011; al-Thawra, 2011). The regime selectively chose significant figures for testimony. Interestingly, they were not from the plutocracy or Alawites because

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[133] Author's interview with Ayham al-Ebeid.

such testimonies were more credible when they came from Sunnis or Christians. They competed among themselves in exaggeration, aggression and even bullying. It was a means through which the regime demonstrated legitimacy, and at the same time an opportunity for different figures to prove their loyalty, which would entitle them to promotions and better positions. Testimonials mixed loyalty to the plutocracy with love of the country, which became one and the same. Testimonies came mainly from opportunists who benefitted from the regime, and feared it collapsing, such as Ahmad Hassoun, Mamoun Rahma and Fares Shehabi. Consequently, testimonies could be seen as propaganda in support of the regime, which does not reflect a real conviction.

The religious institutions played a significant role by pledging support to the regime and proving its legitimacy. Bashar al-Assad only restored the position of Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti after the revolt, because of his attitude towards the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. He came from the al-Ashary religious school, which maintains that 'good believers do not have the right to revolt even if the ruler is not just, does not share power or even kills people' (Sharif, 1961). The school theorises that an unjust ruler in power for 40 years remains better than a single day without a ruler. He defended the military response to the revolt and called for an excessive use of force. Interestingly, he deployed *takfir*[134] against the demonstrators, which justifies killing them according to the Islamic law (Habash, 2013).

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[134] Arabic word meaning 'A Muslim accusing another Muslim, or an adherent of another Abrahamic faith, of apostasy'.

Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, the grand *mufti* of Syria since 2005, was one of the closest Sunni figures to the plutocracy, and most helpful to the regime. He used his religious position to testify for the regime and brighten its image in national, international, Arabic and Islamic public platforms (Khalifa, 2013). His most controversial statement was to threaten the West that he would launch suicide bombers in Europe to destabilise their societies if they supported the revolt. In a phone call with the state television he legitimised the bombardment of popular incubators of the rebels and the use of the barrel bombs as a national and religious duty, which gave the regime a religious legitimacy. Hassoun is known for his connections with Major-General Ali Mamlouk and Major-General Assef Shawkat, which qualified him for the position (Aawsat, 2015). He rejected the establishment of religious parties in Syria, and noted that Islamists could join political parties if they wished to share power. He accused the MB of seeking to make the city of Hama the capital of an Islamic State since the 1980s, which legitimised their bombardment as a national and religious duty. He criticised the rebels and told them to be ashamed of themselves (Orient, 2017).

Mamoun Rahma was a religious figure who was used by the plutocracy to testify for the regime for a good reason. Rahma came from Kafr Batna, a town in the Damascus countryside. In 2012, he was kidnapped, and his left ear was cut off completely, allegedly because of his attitude towards the revolt and his support of the regime. The plutocracy benefitted from his story and promoted him to become the *imam* of the Omayyad Mosque, the most important mosque in central Damascus. He testified for the regime vigorously. On his platform in the mosque,

he waved the national flag, kissed it and asked everyone to kiss it. He promised to crush the revolt, and announced his full support to Bashar al-Assad as the sole unique president. He addressed people to send their sons for conscription, and not to allow them to hide. In a precedent, he addressed people to make pilgrimage to the Mount of Qasioun in Damascus, rather than to Mecca. He noted, 'If you miss travelling between Safa and Marwa,[135] you can travel between the houses of martyrs' (Al-Jazeera, 2015). He glorified the Russian president, Vladimir Putin and argued that his military intervention in Syria was ethical and religious, as opposed to the role of the KSA which supported the rebels (Bajes, 2015).

Fares Shehabi was an Aleppo business man crony capitalist connected to the plutocracy. He worked closely with Rami Makhlouf to found Sham Holding Company. He was nominated the head of Aleppo Chamber of Industry and an MP. He was one of the founders of the Bank of France and al-Sharq Bank in Syria and of other pharmaceutical industries, in addition to an industrial plant for packing and packaging agricultural produce (Aliqtisadi, 2018). From his safe lavish residency in Beirut, along with his family, Shehabi gave economic statements while carrying a rifle under a large photo of Bashar al-Assad. He glorified him, flirted with his speeches and often bullied his opponents. He announced production of a remotely-controlled small war vehicle to save the lives of the soldiers. The initiative, which he launched on 17 April 2017, interestingly coincided with Independence Day. He noted that the vehicle was the least he could do to respond and revenge

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[135] Safa and Marwa are two small hills in Mecca in KSA. Muslims travel back and forth between them seven times, during the ritual pilgrimages of *Hajj* and *Umrah*.

for Aleppo and for Syria (Ebabbaladi, 2017). He was expecting to be rewarded and nominated as a prime minister. On his Facebook page he anticipated and posted what he called the agenda of his future government. He noted that his agenda would be based on the speeches, strategy and guidance of Bashar al-Assad (Alalam, 2018).

The plutocracy also responded with propaganda that the revolt was allied with ISIS. The allegation enabled the regime to claim that it was defending secular values prized in the West against Islamic terrorist groups (Gunter, 2014). There was a coherent and successful strategy behind this marketing. The propaganda was both on the national and international levels and recruited Western journalists, aid workers and policymakers (Ciezadlo, 2016). The BBC coverage implicitly showed the revolt as a movement by extremist Islamists. The plutocracy managed to lobby several visits to Damascus by international delegations, such as Baroness Caroline Cox from the British House of Lords (Humanitarian Arid Relief Trust, 2017), and the British Anglican priest, Andrew Ashdown, in November 2017 in propaganda declaring international legitimacy for its political and military approach to the conflict. The message they conveyed was that the regime is the sole guarantor of secularism and tolerance towards the Christians (Lucas, 2018). Fawaz al-Akhras played an important role in the propaganda via his British Syrian Society. He successfully hired the former ambassador of the UK, Peter Ford, the Chief of the Society, who soon denied the allegations that the regime used chemical weapons on the BBC. Nationally, the propaganda was mainly lobbied by singers, actors and artists who could appeal to the world and communicate a civilised image of the

regime. They competed to be filmed kissing military shoes or celebrating their weddings in military checkpoints, which became a symbol of loyalty, nationalism and love of the country. Poems and songs glorified the regime and the plutocracy. More interviews were conducted on national television with old Baath Party affiliates from Palestine, Algeria, and other countries who still believed in the Baath Party ideology. On top of that was the role of international media in the propaganda. It focused on Bashar al-Assad as a Western-educated ophthalmologist, and on his London-born wife Asma, as a rose in the desert (The Atlantic, 2012).

The state spokespersons in national media quarters, and international platforms such as the United Nations, the UN Human Rights Council and the Arab league, communicated an image that the regime was in control, and that it was the only the regime that could guarantee a normal life. Bouthaina Shaaban used her old international connections to communicate a testimony that the regime was fighting terrorist groups. She enjoyed popularity among the Western media and diplomatic quarters as a UK-educated female. However, her credibility was at stake as she provided misleading information such as denying Syrian ownership of chemical weapons, which was later admitted by the regime (Schulberg, 2016). Walid Muallem issued several witty press releases in imitation to Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf (1940-) upon the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which people liked and followed. However, his credibility was also at stake after a fake video scandal which showed pictures of killings in Lebanon in 2000 as recent pictures of crimes he alleged had recently occurred in Jisr al-Shughour (Hayward, 2017). Jihad

Makdissi was carefully chosen to replace Muallem in press releases. Makdissi was a young charismatic diplomat, and most importantly a Christian who could appeal to the West. His flight in 2012 was a loss to the regime that had kept chasing him not to defect (Dawber, 2013).

The internet and telecommunications, which made 2011 different from 2000 and 2005, reflected a coordinated response between the regime, the plutocracy, the security and the state institutions. The control of social media was not only to prevent communication and coordination for demonstrations, but also inspiration of ideas, rights and means of showing dissatisfaction with the plutocracy. Unlike the 2000 and 2005 elitism, the use of social media reflected on the popularity and demographics of the revolt. It spread and appealed to younger segments of the society who found it easier to communicate than before. Being owned by the Makhloufs, the mobile provider system technically failed sending or receiving any text messages that contained the word Friday.[136] Outgoing calls were failed for two hours on Fridays after the prayers.[137] Social media and Facebook messages of the *tanseeqiat* were bugged and coordinated by the security.[138]

Other procedures on different levels had also been taken by the plutocracy to elucidate its response. In contrast with the regimes that had fallen, the plutocracy mobilised civil servants, trade unionists, business groups, Islamists and other supporters such as the Baath Party affiliates as well as minorities and pro-regime

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[136] The protests were arranged on Fridays.
[137] The protests started from the mosques immediately after the prayers, and continued for two hours.
[138] Author's interview with Ayham al-Ebeid.

nationalists (Gunter, 2014). State employees were taken from their offices and were organised to occupy the main squares, and to sing and dance in support of Bashar al-Assad. They were provided with posters of the national flag and loyal photos and slogans to carry and wave. No absences were allowed, and employees were paid as a normal working day. Resignation from state employment was treated as suspicious and was referred to the National Security Bureau for investigation.[139]

On 27 February 2012, Bashar al-Assad issued Decree 94/2012 to adopt a new, rewritten and amended constitution in an attempt at a package of reforms he had promised in his third speech on 21 June 2011 to contain the revolt. The constitution provided for equality among citizens, recognised the cultural diversity of the country, and considered freedom a sacred right. It allowed for political and economic pluralism and provided for the separation of powers. The only significant difference was the abolition of the controversial Article 8, but it was too late (Aksalser, 2011). The new constitution gained much criticism for many reasons. It granted executive, legislative and judicial powers to the president and failed to grant the parliament broad powers such as granting confidence to the government or to approve the appointment of ministers and senior officials. The application of public freedom as stipulated in the constitution remained a legitimate question as most types of freedom were provided in the 1973 constitution but was not applied. Only representatives of the parties of the NPF and loyal independent and human rights experts participated in the discussions, while both internal and external

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[139] Author's interview with Mohamad al-Haj Ali.

opposition were excluded. It preserved most of its articles of the previous constitutions, which could be seen as a revision of the constitution, rather than a rewrite. The loyal Syria Network for Human Rights viewed the constitution as a modern means of democracy. Russia expressed its happiness, while France and a number of Western countries considered a referendum on the constitution to be ridiculous in light of the military operations taking place in the country (Almanar, 2012).

The structure and timing of the 2012 constitution could be criticised as tailored on Bashar al-Assad's side (Awak, 2016). It allowed the current president to run for two additional terms. Nominating the president was limited to the approval of 35 MPs, which could be seen as a means of vetoing any undesirable candidate. The constitution also stipulated that the candidate must be a resident of Syria for ten consecutive years, and not previously convicted, which would be an exclusion of most of the Syrian opposition figures who were either imprisoned inside or were forced to travel abroad (ILO, 2012). In 2016, Nabil Darwish[140] announced the amendment of the electoral law to allow the military to vote, which was a precedent in the history of the parliament and political life (Alahed, 2016).

The plutocracy sought to revive the Baath Party ideology to adapt to the revolt. During nearly five decades in power, it has evolved from an Arab national movement into a vast organisation that has infiltrated every aspect of public life (BBC, 2012). The Baath Party secured the rule of the regime for decades, a role

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[140] Head of the Parliamentarian Legislative and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

which the revolt emphasised. The long-serving Abdullah al-Ahmar was house-arrested in mid-July 2012 and banned from travelling since the bombing of the national security headquarters because he failed to adapt with the revolt and to mobilise people in support of the plutocracy. Al-Ahmar opposed the crackdown of the army and security on people, and was trying to find an honourable abdication that would preserve the prestige reputation and history of the Baath Party (Al-Arabiya, 2012). In 2016, the regime announced dissolving and abolishing the National Command of the Baath Party completely (The Baath Party, 2016). A report published in the *al-Hayat* newspaper considered it a recognition by the Baath Party of its long-denied end. The *Al-Akhbar* newspaper[141] attributed the dissolution of the institution to its inefficiency and lack of any practical content on the ground (Al-Arabiya, 2016), despite its supreme authority in the organisational hierarchy of the Baath Party.

Repression as a response by the regime was applied side by side with adaptation by the plutocracy. The regime dealt with the revolt as a passing unrest that would be aborted repression. The immediate military escalation was unprecedented in the history of the region and the Arab Spring. Bashar al-Assad concluded that the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators had fallen because they did not use enough force. They were weak and fell because they had only encouraged their enemies, and would encourage his. The resulting violence and deaths changed a popular uprising into a life or death struggle mainly between the people and the regime, but to some extent between Sunnis and Alawites. It also turned into a proxy

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[141] Lebanese newspaper close to Hezbollah.

regional conflict between Shiites in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon against Sunnis in Turkey, KSA and Qatar. On the international scene, it was a renewal of the Cold War between the US and its NATO allies against Russia and China, but this time with the involvement of al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (Gunter, 2014; Rasas, 2013).

Unlike the Egyptian or Tunisian army, the Syrian army intervened fully to defend the regime and deter the activists by targeting their incubator environment. The military risked undermining its image as a defender of the nation, especially because the crowds were representatives of the nation, and could not be dismissed under any justifications. This attitude could be explained largely by the structure of the military and the role of the plutocracy (Bellin, 2012). The regime relied on the military for its survival. At the same time, the military and the plutocracy depended on the survival of the regime, and did not have any incentive in parting themselves from it. Such type of regime in which a single powerful person rules society through an extensive system of personal patronage, rather than obedience to impersonal laws, can be both very strong and very vulnerable because it consists of different politicised figures where the leader must serve as a broker among them. Moreover, the loyalty of the military towards the regime may vary as it depends on the workings of the patronage system (Goldstone, 2003). Although these regimes can be very strong, their stability is solely based on the political whim of the leader, which would subsequently be shattered if he lost his legitimacy.

Despite their symbolic role in repression, the ministers of defence were significantly chosen to move from the sectarian frame to the notion of a cross-sectional support of Syrian society (Nassef, 2016). Even under Hafez al-Assad, none of the ministers of defence were an Alawite. They did not hold real power and were subordinated to Alawite army commanders, such as Maher al-Assad, or security intelligence, such as Ali Mamlouk. Interestingly, Dawoud Rajiha who was appointed in August 2011 and was killed in July 2012, was a Christian from the Damascus countryside. Similarly, Fahd Jassem al-Freij who succeeded him, came from a Sunni Arab tribe in Hama, the stronghold of the MB.

The plutocracy vis-à-vis foreign interest

The selective implementation of some of the deals signed with Russia and Iran and stalling others, reflected the fact that despite the war and the foreign powers, the regime was not hollowed, and the powers of the plutocracy to govern the society and the economy remained intact. The plutocracy only allowed the implementation of deals that would not compete with their own companies or beat their prices. Iran won significant economic contracts including signing a memorandum of understanding to launch a mobile operator, invest in one of the most lucrative phosphate mines, agricultural investments, and co-operation in higher education and universities. The implementation of these deals in particular had been stalled by the plutocracy, because it would compete with the Makhloufs' similar companies, SyriaTel, British Gulfsands' Foreign Company and the Syrian International University for Science and Technology. In May 2018, the Makhloufs instructed the Ministry of Communication and Technology to block calls and video

applications, because they were causing huge losses for SyriaTel as people were using them for both local and international calls.

The plutocracy had to adapt with the emerging context of the Arab Spring and international intervention. The key driver for the plutocracy since the 2011 revolt had been searching for survival, whether via religious actors, economic means or seeking external support, which is a critical difference from the Damascus Spring and the Damascus Declaration where the means to counter the protests were not economic. It is not a new plutocracy in the sense of it being reformed, but in the sense of what is essential for it to survive.[142] Adaptation allowed external players to intervene, to prevent the downfall of the regime. Adaptation meant appealing to Russian and Iranian support. The plutocracy adapted to the external dynamics and foreign intervention to ensure its survival. Russia and Iran intervened militarily, while Russia and China protected the regime politically via vetoing any UN resolution for an international intervention against the regime (UN, **2011**).

The level of adaptation in 2011 had been unprecedented as a means of response by the plutocracy because the external context is different. The circumstances surrounding the challenge were no longer necessarily primarily from civil society. The fight had literally become for the physical survival of the regime. The regime was weakened and unstable with potential challenges particularly with seeking financial support for reconstruction while it was politically rejected. Plutocracy remained the same but with adaptive means. What prompted reform was seeking

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[142] Author's interview with Sean Foley.

survival. However, the plutocracy was not prepared to make concessions to share power and jeopardise the regime. Therefore, the declared reforms, amending the constitution and lifting the emergency law could only be seen as a rhetoric to buy time (Heydemann, 2018).

The Bashar al-Assad who made the statement in March 2011 was different from 2000 and 2005. He escaped being next after Saddam Hussein, and escaped being accountable for the al-Hariri assassination, but the scale of the challenge in 2011 was greater than ever before. The regime was facing an unprecedented level of protest (Coughlin, 2012). The regime sought legitimacy and support from its allies and supporters, rather than from the Syrian people themselves. The primary saviour of the regime was the Iranians. Bashar al-Assad was reportedly willing to give up his own position within the first two weeks of the revolt. Such a scenario would have left the plutocracy and the Alawites to the unknown. In a quick visit by Qassem Soleimani in 2011, the Iranians convinced Bashar al-Assad to stay and they planned a quick response. In 2012, they supported him militarily and economically, and provided him with oil as he was on the verge of collapse. In 2015, they convinced the Russians to support him militarily when he was on the verge of collapse again (Alnahar, 2015).

Despite their different agendas and interests, both Russia and Iran invested in the Syrian war and would only be paid back if and when they would monopolise the reconstruction projects, shape the national policies and establish a military foothold. Both would attempt to create a military and economic leverage, while Iran

would additionally attempt to create a religious leverage for its expansionist Shiite crescent project (Uzun, 2017). Russia emerged from a broader international equation while Iran was more dominated by sectarian calculations and its internal dynamics of power. The Russian attitude could be seen as based on a political dialogue between the regime and the opposition, while the Iranian attitude was based on that the political solution should be a direct reflection of the military solution (Stepanova, 2012). The differences in the interests and perceptions led to and overlapped competition among the foreign powers. Nonetheless, the meeting points between the Russians and Iranians remained greater than differences.

Iran wishes to preserve its geopolitical, military and economic interests in Syria via developing military, and to a lesser degree economic leverage. It wants to institutionalise its militias in Syria so that they remain relevant in the face of future threats. This would provide a front-line defence that enables Tehran to fight outside of its borders and prevent a conflict on its own territory. Its overseas militia would pursue the Iranian interests without jeopardising the military in a direct confrontation. However, the Iranian interest in Syria is not only military, but also religious, social and cultural. Syria is crucial to the expansionist Shiite Crescent project, and has many shrines that Iran considers holy, most importantly Sayyidah Zaynab in the southern suburbs of Damascus. A new phase of the Iranian religious hegemony crystallised after the military intervention and the bringing of Shiite militias to fight in Syria. The Iranian ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Reza Sheibani, demanded the Syrian regime in April 2016 to promote the teaching and learning processes of the Persian language in the Syrian universities and schools.

According to the state media, the Iranian embassy funded the establishment of the College of Islamic Schools in Damascus. The College would be open in co-operation with the International Academy of the Proximity of Iranian Islamic Schools, an official Iranian body founded by Ali Khamenei in 1990 to bring different Islamic sects and views together. in January 2018, Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's international affairs advisor, announced the opening of Azad, a branch of the Islamic Free University of Iran in Damascus. Azad, he noted, would also open in Iraq and Lebanon, which reflects the ambitions of Tehran to control the region religiously (Orient, 2018).

The military intervention of Iran has established a strong presence in Syria, and is significant to counterbalance Israel, KSA and the US. This does not only secure an Iranian hegemony, but also transforms its allied Syrian militia into an institutionalised military-political force, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon which has been used as a non-state actor. The Head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, General Moahmmad Ali Jaafari, has been clear about his intentions to bolster his military in Syria. On 23 November 2017, he noted that Bashar al-Assad knew he was indebted to the Iranian military and understood that it was crucial to his political survival. The Revolutionary Guard expressed their ability to deploy and mobilise pro-Iranian militias in Syria, in a manifestation of solid power, and Russia was part of the target audience (Al-Jazeera, 2017).

The economic interest of Iran is not separable from its military intervention, which cost billions of dollars and hundreds of experts and soldiers to support the regime.

Iran, however, is struggling to reap the rewards of its intervention in Syria amid unequal competition with Russia. The regime is keen to attract Russian and Chinese companies and is cautious of the increased hegemony of Iran. Other difficulties arise because these countries either do not have enough money or are not prepared to dedicate huge funds to launch their own mega projects in Syria amid their economic crisis. It is unclear who will finance the reconstruction, estimated at 300 billion USD, especially given that the UN, the West and the GCC, who have the money to do so, would not choose Iran. Iran is not qualified to reconstruct Syria. Its companies do not have effective management and are associated with the military. They are corrupt and lack transparency, which would complicate economic efforts (Alyoum, 2018).

Russia wishes to preserve its geopolitical, military and economic interests in Syria via developing a military, and to a lesser degree economic leverage. The Russian military base in Tartus, which was erected in accordance with an agreement between the two countries in 1971, is its only marine base in the Mediterranean. Russia wishes to expand and develop its Tartus base in order to increase its presence in the Mediterranean. In 2008, Bashar al-Assad agreed to develop the base into a permanent base for the Russian nuclear marine. Since then, Russia has been developing the base and qualifying it for larger military vessels. Additionally, Syria ranks seventh among clients of the Russian weapons industry (Al-Jazeera, 2012).

The Russian support for the regime was political and military from the beginning of the revolt. Economic support was very unlikely as Russia had its own economic difficulties and challenges. It did use its veto in the Security Council to block draft resolutions that condemned the regime, or would potentially use it for international intervention similar to Iraq. The regime was indebted to the Russians for its political survival. In a speech at a ceremony honouring soldiers and officers who took part in the military operation in Syria, Vladimir Putin noted that the Russian bases in Hameim and Tartus would continue their work permanently, and that they are important to protect the Russian interests in Syria (RT, 2017).

Russia also has economic interests in Syria, most importantly the exploration and production of oil and gas as well as other investments in power generation, irrigation, transportation and communication. Tatnfet and Surgutneftegas won contracts for extracting oil in Syria. Tatnfet entered into a contract in 2003 and its first well was drilled in 2010 in the southern Kushma field. Surgutneftegas has built a natural gas pipeline and a processing plant near Raqqa that can handle 1.3 billion cubic metres of gas. It also won a contract for the exploration of the reserves of oil and gas to be found on the Syrian coast over the next 25 years. Additionally, the Nothwerstern Gropus received a tender in 2008 for the construction of an oil treatment plant near Deir al-Zour and is competing in oil exploration tenders (Al-Jazeera, 2012).

More than 200 executives crowded into the Russian Chamber of Commerce on 2 March 2018 where they attended a Syrian-Russian business forum, hoping to cash

in on Moscow's military role in Syria. They peddled everything from power station engineering services to shipping as they eyed deals they expect to emerge when the fighting eventually ends (Hille, 2018). 200-500 billion USD would be needed for the reconstruction of the Syrian economy. Sergei Katyrin, the president of the Chamber of Commerce quoted Bashar al-Assad saying that the priority would be given to Russian businesses. The Syrian officials were seeking Russian investment in 26 projects, including a planned rail line linking the capital to its airport, industrial plants to produce anything from cement to yeast and tyres, and power generation projects in Homs (Orient, 2018).

The Russian state-owned arms company has made enormous profits from its support of the regime (MacFarquhar, 2018). The CEO of Rosoboronexport, Alexander Mikheev, noted that in 2017 the company signed contracts in 53 countries worth approximately 15 billion USD. These contracts include new clients in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions, expanding the geographic scope of the Russian arms markets. Vladimir Kozhin, Vladimir Putin's aide for military and technical co-operation noted that Russia has entered into contracts or started serious pre-contract work in areas where it previously did little or no work such as KSA, Qatar, Bahrain and Niger. Kozhin noted that the Syrian civil war is spurring on a huge demand for modern Russian weapons. Vladimir Shamanov, the head of the Russian Duma's Defence Committee has made the case that more than 200 new types of Russian weapons have been tested in Syria, and created a greater demand for Russian weaponry. One example, at the HeliRussia-2017 arms show in Moscow in May 2017, Rosoboronexpoert showcased Takhion and Orlan-10E

drones. The Russian news agency TASS published that the interest of foreign customers in these drones has risen after their successful use in combat conditions during the anti-terror operation of the Russian air task force in Syria (Fakih, 2018).

Images of Putin and Khamenei have spread in the regime-held areas under banners reading, 'Together we win!' 'Together' does not necessarily mean homogeneity and coherence. Both Russia and Iran have their conflicting interests in Syria. While Russia is focusing on controlling the Syrian coast, Iran is rallying and expanding its influence in Damascus and Aleppo, and focuses on religious tourism. In the last two years, Shiite schools have been spreading, such as the Grand Apostle Complex and the Jaafari School, as well as Persian language centres. With the spread of the Shiite tide to the Syrian coast and the presence of Russia in the same areas, the Ministry of Religious Affairs closed several Shiite schools in the region, most importantly Ras al-Ain, Ain Shqaq, Qardaha, Karsana, Stamu, Central High School and Bahluliyah, because they do not adhere to the curriculum of the Syrian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The rivalry between the Iranians and the Russians in the Syrian coastal areas is reflected in their language centres. While Iran has supported learning Persian, Russia has offered scholarships to learn Russian. The Ministry of Education added the Russian language at the beginning of the academic year 2017-2018. It became an optional language in the primary school, and compulsory in grade 7, just like English or French. The Minister of Education Hazwan al-Waz noted that the ministry has finished all the preparations for teaching Russian in a number of

schools, including the curricula and qualifying teachers. Likewise, Iran focuses on supporting the Shiite and Persian language centres in several provinces such as Damascus and Lattakia, through different platforms such as the Imam Khomeini's Centre, the Hasaniyah School in Damascus, the Complex of the Great Prophet and the Complex of Sayyidah Rouqaya in Tartous, which offered scholarships and grants (Orient, 2018). These efforts aim at larger engagement in the Syrian society, however, such languages are not expected to be popular among people or the youth. They are semantically and syntactically different from Arabic, but also from English and French. Moreover, the Ministry of Education does not have the language teaching techniques, and even failed in teaching English and French over the past few decades.

The conflict of interest between the states of foreign intervention also extends to their relation with the regime itself. The regime showed zero interest in the Valdai Discussion Club, perhaps Russia's most prestigious international foreign policy forum, with a rosy assessment of the Russian effort to unite the fractious Syrian parties in negotiation to end the war. In her speech, Bouthaina Shaaban omitted all mention of political settlement. Instead, she repeatedly said that Damascus would soon declare a final victory that she said has been delayed by American and Turkish aid to the opposition. Russia expressed overt frustration noting that part of the government elite may have greater hopes for military victory than the dividends that negotiations would eventually pay. Vitaly Naumkin, the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a trusted

advisor to the Russian government on Middle East matters noted, 'This military victory is an illusion; you cannot win this battle.' (MacFarquhar, 2018).

Conclusion

The year 2011 marked a change in the plutocracy, personality and actors. The Makhloufs continued governing the society through their wealth. Mustafa Tlass controversially left for France for what he described as medical treatment. The year 2011 was different from the proceeding social movements in 2000 and 2005 in the development of the plutocracy, the social movement and their interactions and responses. It was different because of the changes in the internal and external context, conditions and circumstances as well as the changes in the nature of political and social groups. Given the severity of the challenge, the regime and the plutocracy collaboratively developed a dynamic of conflict based on denial, adaptation and repression. The response of the plutocracy by adaptation was complementary to the response of the regime by repression, and was essential for the survival of the regime.

The 2011 revolt was an outcome of the interaction from external context with a longstanding internal context. Multiple internal and external, social economic and political factors catalysed the 2011 revolt. Despite the economic situation, droughts and social media environment, the Arab Spring had a snowballing effect across the region and remains the major driver of the revolt. The catalyst was the external context combined with media environment in which people learned about

the Arab Spring, saw it and responded to it. The broader reason for the protest was however, the failure to get a resolution between the plutocracy and people.

Externally, the Arab Spring across the Middle East toppling authoritarian regimes had a snowballing effect in the region. While the international community supported the Arab Spring revolutions, Russia and Iran supported the regime, and intervened to prevent its downfall, which is a key distinctive feature of the 2011 movement. Internally, the internet and social media inspired people, and played a significant role in mobilising, empowering, shaping and influencing opinions and changes. The growth rate of Facebook and Twitter impacted the demographics of the protest movement in 2011 and appealed to younger users (Bebawi, 2014). The following chapter offers my conclusions. It reviews the key findings and analysis of the case study.

VIII.   Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter offers my conclusions. It reviews the key findings and analysis of the case study.

Findings and analysis of the case study

The concept of plutocracy explains the political structure and captures the essence of rule in Syria under both Hafez al-Assad, and more particularly under Bashar al-Assad between 2000-2018. The analytical study shows that an elite group of individuals and families derived power from their wealth and controlled most of the business in Syria for their own benefit and the benefit of the regime in a two-way complementary relationship. The Makhloufs, the Khaddams, the Tlasses and the

Zuabis established business networks and connections which permeated the institutions of government, including parliament, bureaucracy, the Baath Party, the military and intelligence services, and co-opted other potential sources of power including the Alawite minority and religious institutions.

The case study refutes characterisations of the regime as either a simple autocracy or a sectarian Alawite monopoly. Sectarianism, despite its relevance to the dynamics of power, does not provide a useful or even plausible definition or explanation of the regime. Plutocracy created a system and business networks that transcends geographical, ethnic and religious differences. It advocated the personal interest of the elite, but it was also an outgrowth of what could be seen as necessary for the stability of the country at a time when the Middle East was in turmoil, and Syria itself was under threat. Plutocracy could not necessarily be seen as personal interests, but as an attempt to find a stable, responsible and responsive system which institutions had failed to achieve since the first military coup in 1949.

The plutocracy responded to calls for a more pluralistic system, greater accountability and an end to corruption that surfaced in 2000, 2005 and 2011 in such a way as to preserve their own power and that of the regime. The response of the plutocracy was in tandem and in support of the regime. It was insignificant between 1970-2000 because the democratic attempts were timid. However, the response was more significant between 2000-2005, and between 2005-2011. The plutocracy responded by effectively adapting and modifying itself to challenges.

The adaptation was to create an institutional structure and support that could deal with the threat of civil society movement, and repress it. Nonetheless, the response between 2011-2018 was different because of the severity of the challenge, and it was through adaptation by the plutocracy and repression by the regime.

The notion of plutocracy emerged in response to internal and external conditions within which it developed, regressed, evolved or devolved. The identification of the political system as a plutocracy derives from the research examination of empirical evidence, not the claims of Bashar al-Assad or others in leadership positions. Bashar al-Assad might not have to set out to promote plutocracy. He was himself vague about the nature of the system and apparently saw no need to define it with any particular label. However, his ideas of loyalty and control were configured to channel through an elite group of the wealthy to govern the society and consolidate his rule.

The regime and the plutocracy remain two separate entities, but had common interests. The regime is an intermediate stratum between the government which makes day-to-day decisions, and the state which is a complex bureaucracy tasked with a range of coercive functions. Plutocracy, on the other hand, is not a bloc, but has been used in this thesis to refer to four families as the operational heart of the plutocracy who controlled most of the wealth and business networks in Syria. The relationship between the regime and the plutocracy was two-way complementary. The plutocracy needed the regime to advance its economic interests. The relationship evolved over time. Before 2011, the regime needed the plutocracy to

manage political power and calls for greater democracy. After 2011, the regime needed the plutocracy for survival.

General observations could be drawn about the response of political regimes to calls for greater democracy in the context of an interaction between Islam and democracy. Despite of the fact that they do not make a fully-developed plutocracy, the wealthy in different parts of the Middle East started to enter politics since the 1920s. Recently, examples included the nomination of Elias Murr for the Ministry of the Interior in 2000 in Lebanon (Nassif, 2018), al-Waleed bin Talal in Saudi Arabia, and Naguib Sawiris in 2011 in Egypt (Omar, 2017).

Suggestions for future research

1- Further conceptualisation of plutocracy as unique regime type.

2- The development of comparative case study research into how different plutocracies emerge, develop and survive/end.

3- Developing broader generalised observations from the Syrian case to other Middle Eastern regimes in the context of responses to calls for greater democracy from within.

Limitations

A few challenges were encountered through this research. It is particularly difficult to write conclusively about an ongoing event such as the struggle over conflicting political, economic and social conditions (Gunter, 2014). A dominant trend in the official discourse and state media is to present illusions of democracy, which this thesis addressed by going beyond the official discourse and consulting different

primary and secondary sources representing different orientations in both English and Arabic. A Chief Editor of a state newspaper[143] critiqued interviews as a social research method, and suggested to substantiate it with the interviews, speeches and decrees of Bashar al-Assad as a credible source of data.

A number of the interviewees are state officials who are still in office. Article 65 of Act 50/2004 on public service, and subsequent administrative instructions prohibit them from conducting interviews without obtaining permission from their respective ministry. An application should be filed and processed to the security authorities, which are usually dubious of the intentions of researchers and of Western universities. State officials were reluctant to conduct interviews because these would not give them credit, while they may get in trouble. Some interviewee candidates who are not government officials were also bound by the terms and conditions of their employers which prohibited them from conducting interviews such as the RT. My previous career, background and experience with the official state institutions and international organisations and civil society organisations, put me in a good place to approach key officials and to overcome research challenges and limitations. As a former diplomat in the Foreign Office, I have known or worked with most of the interviewees, which availed me the opportunity to get to know them or to work with them.

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[143] Anonymous, upon his request.

IX.   References

Interviews

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2- Ahmad Mohamad: Former MP, Former governor of Homs, currently Syrian Prime Ministership advisor for national reconciliation affairs, Head of the National Reconciliation Office in the National Security Bureau. 26 March 2018

3- Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib: Former president and currently a member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Religious imam and preacher. 23 March 2018

4- Anas al-Raheb: Dr, Former Syria diplomat, Syrian academic. 23 March 2018

5- Ayham al-Ebeid: Former major in the Syrian army. 18 March 2018

6- Bashar al-Haj Ali: Former Syrian diplomat, Syrian political thinker. 21 March 2018

7- George Sabra: Former president, and currently a member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Signatory of the Damascus Spring and Declaration. 27 March 2018

8- Hosam al-Hafez: Dr, Former Syrian diplomat, served in London, Syrian academic, Head of the board of legal affairs in the interim government, Head of legal office in the higher board of negotiations. 18 March 2018

9- Louai Safi: Dr, Syrian academic, Head of the Syrian American council, Professor in Georgetown University, Spokesperson of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. 18 April 2018

10-   Mohamad Haj Ali:-Former Brigade, Former head of National Defense Academy. 28 March 2018

11-   Mohammad Habash: Dr, Former MP, Syrian Academic, Former Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Syrian parliament. 28 March 2018

12-   Monia al-Saleh: Syrian diplomat, served in the permanent delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic in New York. 22 March 2018

13-   Moutasem al-Jundi: Syrian diplomat, served in Libya, Dubai and Brazil. 21 March 2018

14-   Radwan Ziadeh: Dr, Head of the Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Signatory of the Damascus Spring and Declaration, Head of the Foreign Affairs Office in the Syrian National Council. 27 March 2018

15-   Sean Foley: Dr, American Associate professor of history in Middle Tennessee State University in the US. 24 March 2018

16-   Suheir Atasi: Vice-president of the Syrian National Council. 25 March 2018

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Appendix E: Political map of Syria

Available   from:

https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/syria_pol-2007.pdf

[Accessed 13 July 2018].

Appendix F: Ethno-religious map of Syria
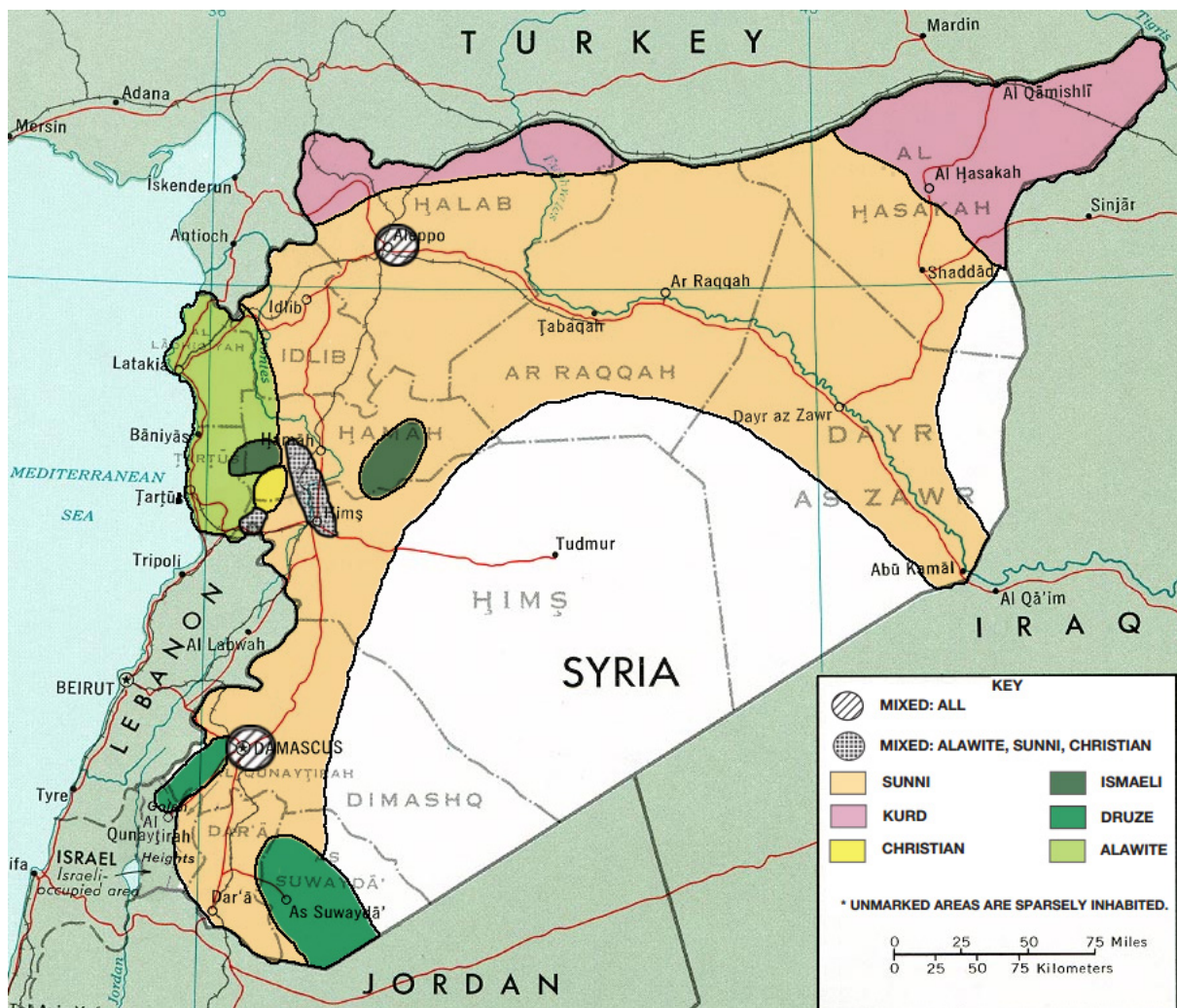
Available from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_Syria#/media/File:Syria_Ethno-religious_composition..jpg [Accessed 13 July 2018].

The Statement of 99

Published on September 27, 2000

The Statement of 99 was the first widely recognised public manifestation of Syria's nascent civil society movement after the death of Hafez al-Asad in June 2000. Published in September of that year, just two months after Bashar al-Asad's inauguration as president, its signatories included prominent intellectuals, artists, and professionals. The Statement of 99 argues passionately for long overdue administrative, economic, and legal reforms. Although it contends that political reforms are a necessary complement to revive the nation, it does not criticise directly either Bashar or the Baath Party's leadership of the government. The Statement of 99 marked the blooming of the 'Damascus Spring,' a season of relaxed regime restrictions on free expression and criticism.

Democracy and human rights today constitute a common humanitarian language, gathering peoples and uniting their hopes for a better future. And even if some major countries use these to promote their policies and interests, interaction among peoples need not result in domination and political dictation. It was permitted to our people in the past, and it will be permitted to them in the future, to be influenced by the experiences of others, and to add to their own contribution, thereby developing their distinctiveness without being closed-in themselves.

Syria today enters the twenty-first century in urgent need for all its citizens to join forces to face the challenges posed by peace, modernisation and the opening-up to the outside world. And for this our people are invited more than ever before to participate in the construction of Syria's present and future. From this objective need, and from concern for our national unity, believing that the future of our country cannot be built by its offspring, being citizens in a republican system where everybody has the right to freedom of opinion and of expression, we, the undersigned, call upon the authorities to accede to the following demands:

—an end to the State of Emergency and martial law in effect in Syria since 1963

—an amnesty for all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience and those who are pursued because of their political ideas and allowing the return of all deportees and exiled citizens

—the establishment of a state of law; the granting of public freedoms; the recognition of political and intellectual pluralism, freedom of assembly, the press and of expression

—the liberation of public life from the [restrictive] laws, constraints and [various] forms of censorship imposed on it, such that citizens would be allowed to express their various interests within a framework of social harmony, peaceful competition and an institutional structure that would enable all to participate in the country's development and prosperity

No reform, be it economic, administrative or legal, will achieve tranquillity and stability in the country unless fully accompanied by the desired political reform, which alone can steer our society towards safe shores.

Signatories

1. Abdul Hadi Abbas (lawyer and writer)

2. Abdul Mu'in al-Mallouhi (member of the Arabic Language Academy)

3. Antoun al-Maqdisi (writer and thinker)

4. Burhan Ghalyoun (writer and thinker)

5. Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (writer and thinker)

6. Michel Kilo (writer)

7. Tayeb Tayzini (writer and thinker)

8. Abdul Rahman Mounif (novelist)

9. Adonis (poet)

10. Burhan Bukhari (researcher)

11. Hanna Aboud (writer)

12. Omar Amiralay (cinematographer)

13. Khalid Taja (actor)

14. Bassam Kousa (actor)

15. Naila al-Atrash (theatre producer)

16. Abdullah Hannah (researcher/historian)

17. Samir Suaifan (economist)

18. Faisal Darraj (researcher)

19. Haidar Haidar (novelist)

20. Nazih Abu 'Afsh (poet)

21. Hasan M. Yousef (novelist/journalist)

22. Usama Muhammad (cinematographer)

23. Nabil Suleiman (novelist/critic)

24. Abdul Razzak 'Eid (researcher/critic)

25. Jad al-Karim Jaba'i (writer/researcher)

26. Abdul Latif Abdul Hamid (cinematographer)

27. Samir Zikra (cinematographer)

28. Ahmad Mu'allah (artist)

29. Fares al-Hellou (actor)

30. Ihsan Abbas (researcher)

31. Hanan Kassab Hassan (university professor)

32. Mamdouh Azzam (novelist)

33. Adel Mahmoud (poet)

34. Hazem al-Azmeh (physician and university professor)

35. Burhan Zraik (lawyer)

36. Muhammad Ra'adoun (lawyer)

37. Yasser Sari (lawyer)

38. Yousef Salman (translator)

39. Hind Midani (cinematographer)

40. Munzir Masri (poet/artist)

41. Ahmad Mu'aitah (university professor)

42. Wafiq Slaitin (university professor)

43. Mujab al-Imam (university professor)

44. Munzir Halloum (university professor)

45. Malik Suleiman (university professor)

46. Sarab Jamal al-Atassi (researcher)

47. Toufiq Haroun (lawyer)

48. Issam Suleiman (physician)

49. Joseph Lahham (lawyer)

50. Attiyah Massouh (researcher)

51. Radwan Kadmani (university professor)

52. Nizar Sabour (artist)

53. Shouaib Tlaimat (university professor)

54. Hassan Sami Youssef (cinematographer/writer)

55. Waha ar-Raheb (cinematographer/actress)

56. Hamid Mer'i (economic consultant)

57. Rif'at as-Sioufi (engineer)

58. Muwafaq Nirbiya (writer)

59. Suheil Shabat (university professor)

60. Jamal Shuhaid (university professor)

61. Omar Koch (writer)

62. Raymond Butros (cinematographer)

63. Antoinette Azriyeh (cinematographer)

64. Najib Nussair (critic/writer)

65. May Skaff (actress)

66. Nidal ad-Dibs (cinematographer)

67. Farah Jukhdar (architect)

68. Akram Katreeb (poet)

69. Lukman Dabraki (poet)

70. Hikmat Shatta (architect)

71. Muhammad Najati Tayyara (researcher)

72. Najmeddine as-Samman (novelist)

73. Ali as-Saleh (economist/researcher)

74. Sabah al-Hallak (researcher)

75. Nawal al-Yazji (researcher)

76. Muhammad Karsaly (cinematographer)

77. Sawsan Zakzak (researcher)

78. Shawki Baghdadi (poet)

79. Bashar Zarkan (musician)

80. Fayez Sarah (journalist)

81. Muhammad al-Fahd (journalist/poet)

82. Muhammad Berri La'awani (theatre producer)

83. Najat Amoudi (educator)

84. Adel Zakkar (physician/poet)

85. Mustafa Khodr (poet)

86. Muhammad Sayed Rassas (writer)

87. Kassem Azzawi (poet)

88. Muhammad Hamdan (writer)

89. Nabil al-Yafi (researcher)

90. Tamim Mun'im (lawyer)

91. Ibrahim Hakim (lawyer)

92. Anwar al-Bunni (lawyer)

93. Khalil Ma'atouk (lawyer)

94. Ali al-Jundi (poet)

95. Ali Kanaan (poet)

96. Muhammad Kamal al-Khatib (researcher)

97. Mamdouh Adwan (poet)

98. Muhammad Malass (cinematographer)

99. Muhammad Ali al-Atassi (journalist)

The Statement of 1,000 or Basic Document

Released to the Arab Press on January 9, 2001

The Statement of 1,000 was a follow-up to the Statement of 99, but the reform prescription it was to advocate was heatedly debated by the civil activists who drafted it. The document was leaked to the Lebanese press before all the intended signatories had approved the final text. Reprising the call for reforms of the Statement of 99, but couched in loftier rhetoric, the Statement of 1,000 goes far beyond previous demands with its call for the replacement of the one-party rule by a multiparty democracy. Its publication was one of the triggers that prompted the 'Damascus Winter' crackdown on civil society activists by the regime.

Syria needs today, more than ever before, an objective reflection to draw lessons from the last decades and to shape its future, following the deterioration of its social, political, economic and cultural conditions, and in response to the challenges of globalisation and economic integration and the challenges of the Arab-Israeli conflict that our people and nation must confront and whose dangers they must repel.

Arising from a sincere faith in our country, in our people, and in their creative capacities and vitality, and keen to interact positively with all serious initiatives for reform, [we assert that] it is vital today to establish a comprehensive dialogue between all citizens and all social classes and political forces, intellectuals and producers and creative people, in order to encourage the development of civil society—a society based on individual freedom, human rights and citizenship; and the establishment of a state of justice and rights, a state for all its people, without favour or exception, in which all can take pride. Our country today needs the efforts of all our citizens to revive civil society, whose weakness, and the attempts to weaken it, over the last decades deprived the country's development and construction process of crucial national capacities that were unable to participate in it actively and positively.

Ambiguity surrounding the meaning of civil society, resulting from multiple democratic experiments in ancient and modern history, negates neither its existence in our country nor its halting progression into a modern society which produced a vibrant culture, a free press, associations, political parties, trade unions and constitutional legitimacy and a peaceful transfer of power. These made Syria one of the least backward—if not the most advanced—of Arab countries.

This path enhanced our society's national cohesion, until the sudden arrival of that interruption based on 'revolutionary legitimacy' rather than constitutional legitimacy. Marginalising civil society involved disregarding the state, the individual and his position, painting the state with one party, one colour and one opinion. It involved creating a state for one part of a society, a part which did not acknowledge its particularity but portrayed itself as representing the people and as 'leading the state and society.' Citizenship was reduced to the narrow concept of belonging to one party and to personal loyalty. This part of society considered the rest of the population as a mere herd. The wealth of the state and of its institutions, the country's resources and those of the institutions of civil society, became like feudal estates that were distributed to followers and loyalists. Patronage replaced law; gifts and favours replaced rights; and personal interests replaced the general interest. Society was desecrated, its wealth plundered, and its destiny commandeered by those who became symbols of oppression. Every citizen became a suspect, if not actually considered guilty, to be apprehended at will. The regime treated people not only as a neglected mass, subject to its will, but also as minor, incompetent and under suspicion. The government went so far as to accuse people of treason whenever they took the smallest initiative to express their opinion or demand their rights. It should be mentioned that marginalising civil society led to marginalising the state itself, underlining the organic relationship between them as neither exists without the other. Civil society constitutes the very substance of the modern state, while the state is civil society's political expression. Together, they constitute the democratic system of government.

Our society, with its national revolutions against colonialism and its political movement against political oppression; which revealed its patriotic and nationalist spirit, eager for liberation and progress; which has been patient and has given many martyrs and sacrifices for freedom and justice, is still capable of rebuilding its social and political life; of rebuilding its economy and culture according to the requirements of modernity and development. It is still capable of joining the march of scientific and technological progress, and can overcome the relationships and structures that produce tyranny and that are intimately linked to the imperialism and national fragmentation that were their cause.

The consequences of coups against political democracy in the name of socialism are now plain. With the collapse of the Soviet model and its East European and third world extensions, the impossibility of building socialism or establishing social democracy without political democracy became obvious. The Soviet experience also demonstrated the fragility of a state that does not draw its legitimacy from civil society, and of an authority that does not draw its legitimacy from the people. Equally plain is the inadequacy of viewing the people as mere subjects of 'revolutionary will,' and of denying the social, cultural and political diversity of a society and the different interests of each of its component parts. The Soviet experience underlined the consequences of denying that rule of law—as a judicial expression of public order and of the essence of the state itself, as well as expression of all that is common between all citizens and social groups—is an historic compromise between all those interests and diverse groups that should be the basis for genuine national unity.

It is this historic compromise which creates constitutions and laws that are in line with the development of society, which itself is affected by the pace of global development. Constitutions are therefore usually modified, changed and improved according to the needs of that development. The concept of civil society in the world to which we belong—geographically at least—that was revived in the 1970s, represented, and still represents, the reality of societal existence, the latter being defined by the transition of mankind from nature to society, that is, to human construction and civil politics, to use the expression of [the medieval Arab historian] Ibn Khaldoun. From this concept arose an array of concepts leading to a 'social covenant' as opposed to the 'divine right' claimed by dictators, kings and emperors. The development of this social covenant is nothing more that the political counterpart of the triumph of reason which placed the human being at the centre of human knowledge. Modern societies and modern thinking gave rise to the modern civil state that guarantees freedom of belief and religious practice and unrestrained thought—all within the framework of acknowledging, in practice, a freedom defined by law, conditioned by responsibility and crowned by the creative initiative, love of knowledge and [the spirit of] working with and for the wider group.

For all these reasons there is a great need today to revive societal and social institutions free of domination by the executive authority and by the security

apparatus, which usurped full powers. These institutions should also be free of all traditional forms of social ties, relationships and structures, such as those of tribalism and sectarianism, in order to re-establish politics in society as its primary free, conscious and constructive activity, and to achieve the crucial balance between society and state, coordinating their activities and thus achieving liberty, equality and justice. National unity is thus bolstered, as is the dignity and sovereignty of the state. The rule of law becomes the final arbiter for all.

Only in civil society can a comprehensive national dialogue characterised by freedom of expression and speech and respect for diverse opinions be conducted, in order to encourage mass participation for the benefit of all the people. No social or political group has the right to decide by itself where the country's national interests lie, and what means should be pursued to achieve those interests. All groups—including the present ruling power—must make their opinions, ideas and programs known to the people for discussion and dialogue. No dialogue is possible without freedom of opinion and expression, free political parties and trade unions, a free press, free social organisations and a legislature that genuinely and effectively represents the people.

No reform is possible without a comprehensive national dialogue because dialogue always produces new facts that are relevant to all. The logic of dialogue negates that of holding a monopoly on truth, patriotism, or any other monopoly. That is why we are calling for the adoption of the principle of dialogue, constructive criticism and peaceful development to resolve all disagreements through compromise and understanding. This is one of the most important characteristics and advantages of civil society.

The vitality of civil society is strikingly manifested in the establishment of voluntary, independent, non-governmental organisations based on democratic choice, whose objective is the establishment of justice and the rule of law that ensures civil rights and protects general liberties. That is why we believe that in defending civil society we defend the state and the authority holding power in that state.

For economic reforms and anti-corruption measures to succeed, they must be preceded and accompanied by a comprehensive package of political and constitutional reforms. Otherwise these reforms will not achieve their objectives. The economic and anti-corruption reform process therefore must develop into a

permanent legal mechanism that stimulates public participation and encourages a continuous monitoring of state institutions as well as the private sector. All this should be done in an atmosphere of transparency that offers all social groups and forces and political parties the opportunity to participate effectively in the processes of planning, preparation, implementation and correction. It will also enable them to identify mistakes, waste and corruption promptly, as well as enabling the judicial system and supervisory bodies to call miscreants to account. Partial and selective measures will not lead to reform.

Our philosophy and practice consider that:

—human beings are aims unto themselves

—freedom, dignity, welfare and happiness are the purpose of development and progress

—national unity and the general interest are yardsticks for all policies and practices

—all citizens are equal before the law, since inequality always creates those who are privileged and those who are deprived of all rights, thus sowing the seeds of discrimination and disunity and degrading social relations to sub political levels

The foundations of our philosophy and practice are that:

—the correct practice of politics is that based on patriotic, national and human interest rather than on private interests

—national achievements are attributable to the people, not to individuals

—social groups and political parties are defined by the entire national social entity

—the people are the sources of all powers

We therefore believe that political reform is the necessary and only way out of the current state of stagnation and decline, and the only way of extricating the general administration from its chronic torpor. We believe, furthermore, that the following must be implemented urgently as necessary preludes to political reform:

1. Abrogation of the Emergency Law now in force. Martial law regulations, emergency courts and all similar measures must be cancelled forthwith, and all

injustices they caused over the years remedied. Political prisoners must be released, and the situation of those deprived of civil and labour rights by special courts and laws must be rectified. Exiles must be allowed to return.

2. Political freedoms—especially freedom of opinion and expression—must be allowed. Civil and political life must be overseen by democratic legislation regulating activities of political parties, associations and non-governmental organisations—especially the trade unions which, through their conversion into state institutions, have lost partly or entirely the very reasons for their establishment.

3. Reinstatement of the publications law ensuring freedom of the press that was annulled by the State of Emergency.

4. Enactment of a democratic election law to regulate elections at all levels in a way that ensures all segments of society are represented fairly, and the electoral process should be subjected to the supervision of an independent judiciary. The parliament elected as the result of this process will be a genuine legislative and supervisory institution, truly representing the will of the people, acting as the highest authoritative reference for all and symbolising the people's membership in the country and their positive participation in deciding how it is governed. The wholeness of the state is never expressed more clearly than by the legislative institution and by the independence and integrity of the judiciary.

5. Independence and integrity of the judiciary with laws applied equally to rulers and ruled.

6. Ensuring that citizens are accorded their full economic rights, most of which are stated in the Constitution. The most important of their constitutionally guaranteed rights are (i) a fair share of national wealth and income; (ii) suitable employment and a life of dignity; and (iii) protecting the right of future generations of their fair share of the country's wealth and to a clean environment. Economic and social development are senseless if they are not aimed at erasing injustice, humanising conditions of work and life and countering unemployment and poverty.

7. Insisting that the parties affiliated to the Progressive National Front (PNF) truly represent the most vibrant forces in Syrian society; that they by themselves today fill the vacuum of Syrian politics; and that the country needs nothing more than the

reinvigoration of the PNF [that] will serve only to perpetuate further the social and economic stagnation and political paralysis. It is imperative to review the relationship of the PNF with the government, to reconsider the concept of 'the leading party in society and the state,' and to review any other concept that excludes the people from political life.

8. Abolition of legal discrimination against women. Stemming from a desire to participate constructively in the process of social development and reform, we call for the establishment of committees for reviving civil society in all sectors of Syrian life as a continuation and development of the concept of the 'friends of civil society.' From a sense of national responsibility and independence, we hope that these committees will play their part in overcoming the negativity and demoralisation, and [enabling Syria to] emerge from the stagnation that doubles our backwardness in relation to the pace of international development. Through these committees, we hope to take the step to a free, independent and democratic society that takes part in laying the foundations for a renaissance that will ensure a better future for the Arab nation.

(Leverett, 2005: 203-2012)