

University of Peloponnese

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

Department of Political Studies and International Relations

Master's Program in

“Mediterranean Studies”

The Syrian regime's resilience through the prism of its
struggle for (re)consolidation of the state

Ilias Mitrousis

Corinth, Greece, January 2020

2. ΥΠΕΥΘΥΝΗ ΔΗΛΩΣΗ

Δηλώνω ρητά και ανεπιφύλακτα ότι η διπλωματική εργασία που σας καταθέτω αποτελεί προϊόν δικής μου πνευματικής προσπάθειας, δεν παραβιάζει τα δικαιώματα τρίτων μερών και ακολουθεί τα διεθνώς αναγνωρισμένα πρότυπα επιστημονικής συγγραφής, τηρώντας πιστά την ακαδημαϊκή δεοντολογία.

Οι απόψεις που εκφράζονται αποτελούν αποκλειστικά ευθύνη του συγγραφέα και ο/η επιβλέπουσα, οι εξεταστές, το Τμήμα και το Πανεπιστήμιο Πελοποννήσου δεν υιοθετούν κατ' ανάγκη τις εκφραζόμενες απόψεις ούτε φέρουν οποιαδήποτε ευθύνη για τυχόν λάθη και παραλείψεις.

Ο Δηλών

Ηλίας Μητρούσης

The Syrian regime's resilience through the prism of its struggle for the (re)consolidation of the state

Keywords: Syria, Syrian state, Syrian uprising, Syrian civil war, Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad, regime security, counterinsurgency

Abstract

This thesis deals with the resilience of President Bashar al-Assad's regime since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and aims to explore the internal factors that helped it cling to power. To that end, the thesis inquires into the leading military and political strategies the regime formulated and implemented in order to cope with the immense ideological, military and institutional challenges to its survival. However, since the name Assad had already shaped the regime -and the country- long before the Bashar inherited the Presidency, this study of contemporary events, cannot but take into account Hafez al-Assad's contribution to the regime's long history of consolidation in Syria. Bashar al-Assad 'inherited' a stable country, where the ideology of his regime was the ideology of the state, and the state institutions have been adjusted to serve the regime's prerogatives and longevity. The Syrian uprising of 2011 and the civil war that followed though, put the regime's 'state' into jeopardy, and along with it the regime itself. In this very context, Bashar al-Assad's regime inextricably tied its survival with that of the state and took pains to strategize accordingly, in order to reassert itself as the only viable and capable entity to govern Syria.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Regime Security Theory.....	5
2.1 Strategies in the pursuit of regime security	7
3. The Syrian regime and its security and legitimacy under Hafez al Assad.....	11
3.1 Consolidation of control over the state institutions and the coercive apparatus	11
3.2 Socio-political control through the party and the economy	13
3.3 Ideological claims to political legitimacy	15
3.4. Legitimacy through Personalism.....	16
4. From Hafez to Bashar; what changed and what remained the same	18
4.1 The economic ‘reform’ and religious maneuvers	19
5. Bashar al-Assad regime’s resilience during the Syrian civil war.....	23
5.1 The early dynamics of the 2011 Syrian upheaval	23
5.2 The ‘sectarianization’ of the opposition.....	25
5.3 The regime’s militarization strategy and the role of the Syrian Arab Army.....	28
5.4 The preservation of the regime’s ‘institutional expression of the state’	32
5.4.1 Holding the state ‘hostage’	33
5.4.2 The ‘strangling’ of rebel governance.....	34
5.4.3 Assad’s ‘selective approach’ on fighting fronts	37
6. Conclusion	39
Bibliography	41

1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the internal factors that contributed to the Assad regime's resilience during the Syrian civil war, with a focus on the efforts to reassert its identification as the only viable and capable entity to govern Syria. The phenomenal dynamic of the wave of protests that stormed the MENA region and brought about several regime changes since 2011, was bogged down in Syria. There, faced with the regime's excessive oppression, it quickly transformed into a civil war in full gear. Shortly after the uprising's eruption, few could predict that the Assad regime would see the dawn of 2012. Amid the chaos and destruction of the civil war, the regime's standing suffered severe fluctuations stretching from the brink of collapse to major military victories against the rebels. However, more than eight years later, the initial assessments of an imminent regime change in Syria, expressed by many experts, were ultimately refuted. Assad has not only managed to survive in power but also to regain control over the majority of the country's pre-war territory. While the civil war was, in large part, shaped under a confluence of embattled camps and a varying level of foreign intervention, the thesis focuses on the impact of the Syrian regime's domestic strategies and self-preservation mechanisms in the course of the conflict.

Since the early stages of the civil war, the regime's hold to power was not only militarily challenged but also ideologically and politically. The formation of numerous opposition groups or entities that tried to establish authorities and perform state functions threatened to delegitimize its monopoly on the ability to "perform the state". Hence, the concrete reinstatement of the regime -at least domestically- as the only "capable" and "legitimate" governing force, was an objective of utmost importance for its survival. Given the scale of the conflict and the intensity of the competition for legitimacy between the regime and the opposition, the struggle for the "state-prize" came down as a zero-sum game; one that up to the time these lines are written, the regime seems all the more dominant.

The main question this thesis attempts to answer is which were the Syrian regime's main strategies that enabled it to withstand the tremendous pressures of a multifront armed rebellion, to reconsolidate its power, and ultimately reclaim its place at the

wheel of the Syrian state. In order to address this question, it is necessary not only to consider how the current regime leadership handled the conflict's dynamics but also which were the long-cultivated structural traits that put it initially in the position to safeguard its coherence and live to fight another day. Arguably, the regime owes this position to Hafez al-Assad, who, during his rule, managed to shield it from domestic threats effectively. Hence, the foundations of the Syrian regime's resilience today can to a significant extent be understood, should someone consider a) its significant coercive capacities, b) its deep intertwinement with the state's institutions, and c) the leadership's long-cultivated political legitimacy, all developed back in the days of Hafez al Assad and continued -though with recalibrations- under the rule of his son. In this context, in order to examine the parameters accounting for the Syrian regime's resilience, as well as Bashar al-Assad's response to the 2011 upheaval and thereafter, we consider that an analysis under the framework of the Regime Security theory is most appropriate.

Regime security theory focuses on the impact that internal security threats towards leaderships in weak-states have on the shaping of the states' security behavior. It argues that governing elites in these states usually suffer from high insecurity regarding the possibilities of internal threats to their rule, and thus they tend to re-orientate state security designs to meet their internal security considerations. In this context, regimes usually proceed to the implementation of a series of internally-oriented strategies -mainly of authoritarian nature- aiming to prevent or neutralize potential domestic threats. Based on the premises mentioned above, the regime security theory arguably provides an explanatory framework for the internal motivations that shape authoritarian regimes' security behaviors as well as their relation with the state. Consequently, this framework can be fairly applied for the examination and comprehension of the Syrian regime's case, for itself fits the description of a regime that has since its establishment meticulously worked towards achieving security from internal threats by resorting mostly to strategies of authoritarian rule. What is more, the theory provides useful insights into the security strategies advanced by regimes to secure their stay in power. These insights can be utilized during the thesis in order firstly to identify those security strategies implemented by both Assads since the establishment of the regime, and secondly, to assess their impact on the latter's security during the current Syrian civil war.

The thesis will begin by presenting the regime security theory's fundamental principles and the main strategies advanced by regimes to achieve their security. Next, it will present how Hafez al Assad's strategies to achieve regime security impacted the structuring of the Syrian state and society and created the conditions for the formulation of the Bashar regime's civil war strategies. Followingly, the focus will shift to the examination of the strategies the Syrian regime followed in order to cope with the escalating uprising since 2011. More particularly, the regime's adoption of an anti-sectarian narrative, in parallel with the official framing of the uprising in sectarian terms, will be examined as a critical legitimacy (re)construction strategy as well as a strategy for the mobilization of its supporters (active and passive). Furthermore, Assad's militarization strategy and the role the Syrian Arab Army played in the regime's resilience will also be discussed under the same context. In the final section, the thesis will delve into how the regime proceeded in order to neutralize those who considered politically threatening opponents. In essence, given that arguably any regime's *raison d' être* is linked inextricably to the monopoly over the performance of the state's functions, this section will focus on the regime's struggle to monopolize that performance as its 'cornerstone' survival strategy. Having examined all the above-mentioned, the thesis will attempt to assess the extent to which the regime's survival can be attributed to its performance during the civil war, regardless of the contribution of its international backers or the handling of the situations by domestic or foreign adversaries.

We have to underline at this point that this thesis does not, in any case, downplay the contribution of Assad's international backers to the regime's survival during the civil war. More particularly, Russian, Iranian, as well as Hezbollah's multifaceted aid is undoubtedly acknowledged as having paramount importance for Damascus' resilience. Concomitantly, the same can be said about the ineffectual -up to now- efforts of its international critics and rivals to bolster the political and armed opposition forces in ways that would be effective on their encounters with the regime. Many experts have argued over time that Assad's survival was merely the outcome of foreign backing or the lack of deeper engagement on behalf of its international adversaries. However, given the abundance in the literature on the role of international and non-state actors in the Syrian conflict, an examination of their influence on Assad's survival is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, by focusing

on how the regime carried out its effort, the thesis will attempt to substantiate the argument that its structural traits and determination to fight tooth and nail throughout the civil war, were solid enough credentials to inspire its allies' commitment for support.

2. Regime Security Theory

Contrary to the classic IR theories that study the state's security perceptions and behaviors through the lens of external threats, Regime security theory posits that internally-originated threats towards an incumbent leadership [regime] can have equal -if not higher- gravity in shaping the state's security perceptions and strategies (Jackson, 2007, p.162). The theory focuses on the regime, instead of the state as the unitary actor in its analytical framework. It, therefore, distinguishes between them, as it considers both as separate referent objects of security. The regime's security interests may differ from the state's, but at the same time, the former's position in power often allows the shaping of the latter's security perceptions accordingly. Job makes that distinction clear by defining separately a 'regime' as "*the small state of persons who hold the highest offices in the set and /or are the elite that effectively command the machinery, especially the coercive forces of the state*" and a 'state' as "*the set of institutions that organizes, regulates and enforces interactions of groups and individuals within its territorial confines*" (Job, 1992, p. 15). Consequently, the definition of Regime security as given by Jackson, refers to "*the condition where governing elites are secure from violent challenges to their rule*" (Jackson, 2007, p. 162). In this context and from this point forward, the term 'regime' will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis with the terms 'incumbents', 'leaders/leadership', 'ruling/governing elites' and 'government' as synonymous.

The Regime security theory's aforementioned position is based on the argument that the conceptualization of security varies significantly, from state to state. According to Buzan, "strong" states -namely, these that enjoy social cohesion and significant institutional capacities that render them domestically stable-, are in a position to regularly perceive their national security in terms of protection of their components from external threats. On the contrary, "weak states" -namely, these that lack both social cohesion and institutional capacities-, typically "*fail to create, a domestic political and social consensus of sufficient strength to eliminate the large-scale use of force as a major and continuing element in the domestic political life of the nation*". With such consensus absent, the idea and institutions of the state become internally contested to the point that it is more appropriate to consider security not in a singular

national context, but rather in terms of its contenders -be it the incumbents, groups, organizations or other individuals- (Buzan, 1983, p. 67).¹

Such is mainly -though not exclusively- the case with new-born states, and especially with those who find themselves struggling with state-building in the post-colonial era. Migdal argues that conditions of fragmented social control -particularly observed in post-colonial states as the outcome of colonialist policies-, significantly narrow the leaderships' ability to engage in serious state-building since it preconditions the existence of significant mobilization capacities (Migdal, 1988, pp. 208-210; 261-263). Ayooob, also in line with Migdal's argument, further complements that the efforts of leaderships in many new-born states to accomplish the task of state-building in a limited timeframe -compared to the European experience-, result in the overloading the domestic political system to the point that it is threatened with "*serious disequilibrium*" (Ayooob, 1992, p. 69). In this context, increased social [and political] fragmentation leads to the emergence of alternative power centers within the society that may put the leadership's authority into question, thus prompting the prioritization of its survival at the expense of any state-building process (Migdal, 1988, pp. 207-213). Moreover, it is essential to note here that such conditions generate a vicious circle in which, should a regime be successfully challenged from within, its successors would probably face the very same survival dilemmas.

The survival concerns of the leaderships in weak-states are summarized into what Job calls the "*the insecurity dilemma*". By paraphrasing realism's fundamental notion of the *security dilemma*, Regime security theory's *insecurity dilemma* focuses on domestic conditions in weak states that influence the governing elites' threat perceptions and thus, their designs on state [regime] security. Indeed, elevated political fragmentation, limited social cohesion due to the existence of various communal groups, institutional shortfalls and lack of consensus on government

¹ Buzan identifies the three pillars of the state as follows: the physical base of the state, the idea of the state and the institutional expression of the state. The first refers to the human and territorial components of the state. The second refers to the peoples' identification with the idea [purpose] of the state as represented by the power holders. The third refers to the institutions of the state including the whole government machinery, the separate state powers, and the laws that regulate all the above. According to Buzan although these three pillars are highly interlinked, each and every one of them deserves to be discussed individually as referent object of security (for more see: Buzan, 1983, pp. 36-72).

policies, are usually powerful enablers of insecurity, in the sense that they reinforce perceptions of threat, not towards the national security, but towards that of the ruling regime (Job, 1992, pp. 17-19). Incumbents, as shown above, may end up competing with alternative groups or individuals that threaten to deprive them of their monopoly on the performance of state functions, and thus their legitimacy to govern, with direct implications to their survival. Consequently -and rather usually in such situations-, regime insecurity vis a vis existing or potential internal threats, leads, in turn, all the more towards authoritarianism.

According to Goemans, from 1913 to 2003, more leaders [or regimes] have been overthrown through “irregular” internal procedures (popular uprisings, revolutions, or coups), than by external intervention. Moreover, 80 percent of leaders who irregularly lost power have faced severe punishments afterward, stretching from exile, to imprisonment or execution (Goemans, 2008, p. 2). Such findings underscore the validity of the argument that for most regimes -particularly of authoritarian nature- political survival equals to physical survival (Koblentz, 2013, p. 7). Hence, high regime insecurity translates into inward strategies aiming to minimize the risk of being critically challenged domestically, either by emerging political or societal actors/groups or by power centers within the state apparatus or the regime itself.

2.1 Strategies in the pursuit of regime security

Repression is probably the most frequently met strategy of regime security, as it is regularly implemented by regimes when their deficiencies, in terms of broader socio-political legitimacy and institutional capacities, become increasingly menacing. It can often take the form of what Migdal calls “dirty tricks” and include illegal imprisonment, torture, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, or even the form of extensive use of force in more severe circumstances -i.e., a rebellion-. Apart from incapacitating threatening challengers, measures such as that curtailment of the rights of assembly and freedom of speech, increased surveillance and non-physical intimidation are frequently implemented to preempt the potential emergence of dissidents that could question the regime’s prerogatives (Migdal, 1988, p. 223; Josua and Edel, 2005, p. 292). In this context, as effective repression requires extensive

resources and a significant build-up of the state's coercive institutions, many regimes opt for a militarization strategy. However, parallel to a militarization effort comes the realization that the growing size and power of the security and armed forces also need to be offset. This explains why insecure regimes, while creating sizeable and multi-branched security forces, at the same time, attempt to create divisions and instill rivalry between different services in order to weaken their autonomy and possibilities to evolve from shields to threats (Jackson, 2007, p. 165). Also, the creation of loyalist militias and paramilitary groups as another militarization measure has a twofold function; firstly, it aims to complement the security forces' capacities regularly, and secondly, to counter-balance the later should the circumstances demand it. However, despite militarization's profound influence on the chances of effective repression, it cannot solely guarantee the survival of a regime, as it is usually too costly to sustain in the long term. Highly developed militarization requires both a relative level of both popular support and institutional capacities. Consequently, it is reasonable to consider militarization and repression within a general context side by side with other strategies of political rule (Josua and Edel, 2005, p. 3).

To counterbalance the lack of broader popular support, leaderships often seek to create loyalties mainly by building and maintaining patronage and clientelist networks. These networks are usually created through the en-masse integration of selected societal groups or individuals -predominantly with religious, ethnical or ideological affiliations to the regime's leadership- into the state institutions and bureaucracy (Jackson, 2017, p. 167). This strategy of selective accommodations into the state machinery represents a particular attribute of neo-patrimonial regimes, and creates what Guliyev calls 'neo-patrimonial administration'; an administration whose components' relationship with the regime is one based on the clientelist principle of "loyalty and rewards". In other words, in return for loyalty, the regime's leadership provides the appointees with access to power centers and material rewards, mainly of economic nature. Typically, such a strategy results in the emergence of conditions of mutual interdependence that indeed create loyalties. Moreover, as the clients use their access to state resources to benefit other individuals close to them, loyalties are generated even outside the narrow confines of the neo-patrimonial administration. Consequently, the regime benefits both from the creation of a loyalist base that spreads into large segments of society, as well as from the creation of clientelist

relationships upon which it can expand and operate its patronage networks (Guliyev, 2011, pp. 583-585). What is more, through the creation of a neo-patrimonial administration, the regime becomes capable of effectively infiltrating the state's bureaucratic realm, to the extent that, in some cases, the boundaries between the regime and the state may be rendered hardly distinguishable.

Yet, although certainly mutually beneficial, the above-mentioned interdependence is actually hierarchically preset. While groups or individuals benefit -to a certain extent- in terms of regime-provided economic incentives and access to power centers, at the same time, they cede their unconditional loyalty to the regime, which, being always on top of the chain, can 'liquidate' it at any time, whatever its needs may be (Salaymeh, 2018, p. 64-65). That hierarchy is strongly reflected through the implementation of what Migdal calls "the Big Shuffle"; namely, the exercise of the regime holders' power of appointment and removal from office. Leaders can remove even top officials with the same ease with which they appoint them, should 'necessity' dictate so (Migdal, 1988, pp. 214-217). In this case, even the threat of a "shuffle" can reinforce the regime's and its patronage networks' cohesion through compliance, thus allowing the maintenance of a firm grip on the state apparatus as a form of 'insurance policy'.

However, it is essential to remark that the strategies mentioned above are primarily focused on achieving a rather 'superficial' stabilization either through compliance (repression) or co-optation (patronage). That means that in the absence of genuine and popular legitimacy, their implementation may have rather temporary effects. Therefore, regimes that envision a long rule usually invest in broader legitimacy-building strategies to ensure internal cohesion and external stability in the long term. Always according to regimes' typological differences, they usually implement legitimacy strategies based on output or identity claims. On the one hand, output-based claims focus on the rulers' performances on delivering in the socio-economic and security spheres. Identity-based claims, on the other hand, emphasize the leadership's ideological, or personalistic traits primarily. Ideology can be used as a claim to legitimacy in the sense that it purports the vision of and the power to shape a collective identity and societal order. In this sense, ideological claims may often entail powerful references not only to political ideologies but to religion as well.

Furthermore, in 'closed authoritarian regimes', one can observe that leadership personality cults are also shaped and presented as a legitimacy source, for they allegedly embody the qualities of a charismatic authority (Soest and Grauvogel, 2007, pp. 289-291). In any case, output-based claims arguably require some time to substantiate as they usually are preconditioned to specific performance results. On the contrary, identity-based claims can have a more immediate effect since they invoke more idealistic notions -such as a political or religious identity, a foundational myth often related to the state-building processor/and personalistic traits- that may be easier to construct and proliferate.

Finally, diversionary tactics are regularly employed by regimes as another primary security strategy. Focusing upon existing or even fabricated external enemies, often functions conveniently in diverting attention or dissent away from domestic conditions. By exploiting national concerns, regimes can effectively rally support and subsequently elevate their legitimacy levels by self-portraying as the 'defenders' of the national interest and state security. Such a strategy can also act as a pretext for extensive militarization that, in turn, further reinforces the rulers' coercive capacities and, therefore, their hold to power (Job, 1988, pp. 28-29). Moreover, the same strategy may also be internally focused. Designating specific minorities or political groups and entities as threatening can potentially bear the exact same results (Jackson, 2007).

3. The Syrian regime and its security and legitimacy under Hafez al Assad.

The foundations of the Syrian regime's security and longevity were meticulously laid down by the current President's father, Hafez al Assad. Since its independence in 1946, and until 1970, Syria experienced a long period of political instability, marked by the staggering number of 21 successful or attempted coups (CIA, 1978, p. 3). This period ended with Hafez al Assad's bloodless coup of 1970, giving its place to a nearly 40-year long period of stable Assad rule. But how Hafez al Assad managed to solidify his rule and even smoothly pass it later on to his son? The answer to this question arguably lies in the ways he built his legitimacy and advanced his regime's control over the Syrian state and society.

Being already Minister of Defense in 1970, Hafez al Assad came to power after sidelining his Baathists companions of the Secret Military Committee, who *de facto* run the state since the coup of 1966. Contrary to his predecessor Salah Jadid, with whom they shared a common Alawi background, he rejected power-sharing options with his comrades and opted instead on the complete personalization of his rule. With the establishment of a highly centralized Presidential system and the new "Permanent Syrian Constitution" of 1973, Assad worked to assume total control of all the critical domains of government as well as to cement his regime's security internally, by entrenching extensively its mechanisms and networks within the state and society (Ma'oz & Yaniv, 1986, pp. 26-29).

3.1 Consolidation of control over the state institutions and the coercive apparatus

Following his successful coup, Hafez was thorough in securing control over the state institutions and especially over the military and the security forces. To that end, the new President made sure to staff both the Baath party's and the state institutions' higher echelons predominantly with his family members, co-sect (Alawi) loyalists, and -though to a lesser extent- with fellow non-Alawi Baathists whose loyalty considered unquestionable. For the Alawis, that move was of particular importance.

For along with their transformation into major political power-brokers, their massive incorporation into the party's and state's structures solidified the regime's coherence through the subsequent appointment-generated loyalties and vertical dependencies. Concomitantly, under the same context the stakes other minorities (such as Christians and Druzes) had on the regime's survival increased, and Sunni dissent was contained - mainly in the military- through the co-optation of specific Sunni families (Darwisheh, 2013).

That strategy of sectarian accommodation and co-optation is best reflected nowhere but, in the military, and the security forces. After all, the consolidation of the state's coercive institutions was of paramount importance to ensure both intra-regime cohesion and the capacity to effective repression should the need arise. Unofficial accounts have that the appointments of officers in the security forces were based on a denominational 'informal quota system'. According to that, three quarters within the officers' corps originated from the President's Alawi denomination, while officers with Sunni Muslim, Christian, Druze and Ismaili background constituted the remaining one quarter. At this point, it is essential to underline that the Alawis as a religious minority were already overrepresented within the military. Since Alawi officers kept high positions within the Secret Military Committee, several hundreds of Alawis were appointed to officers' posts during the intra-military purges that followed the 1963 coup. However, under Hafez al Assad, the Alawis were not only represented within the military and security forces' average rank and file positions, but they also occupied critical posts to all state institutions and formed the regime's inner circle. Nevertheless, telling for the Assad's sectarian co-optation and divide and rule strategy, is that having reserved for himself the position of commander-in-chief of the army, his two deputies (Mustafa Tlass and Hikmat Shihabi) were both Sunni Muslims. Additionally, should a Sunni headed a military unit, his deputies would regularly be Christians or Alawis and their deputies would also be Druzes, Sunnis, Ismailis, and Alawis (Selvik, 2014, p. 2). The establishment of elite military units and paramilitary formations headed by close relatives of the President was also advanced in order to coup-proof the regime.² In the realm of the security apparatus, Hafez al

² Indicative examples of elite-praetorian units are the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, and the Third Armored Division, whereas the Defense Companies constituted a paramilitary formation,

Assad established four distinct and autonomous security and intelligence agencies (*mukhabarat*).³ Operating under the 1963 Baath-imposed state of emergency, which suspended all rights and liberties -and which Assad also kept in place-, these agencies became notorious for their actions to prevent or silence any dissent. Further, while directly accountable to the President of the Republic, they were regularly competing with each other, ultimately to the former's benefit (Rathmell, 1996). Conclusively - and in retrospect- Hafez al Assad managed through all the above mentioned to succeed in what others before him had failed; he effectively coup-proofed his regime and consolidated its grip on the country's massively expanded coercive apparatus. The value of these achievements was proven twice. Firstly, when several of the aforementioned elite military units successfully opposed the attempted coup by Hafez's brother, Rifat al Assad, in 1984. And secondly, when the military, with the contribution of the paramilitary 'Defense companies', violently suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in Hama in 1982.

3.2 Socio-political control through the party and the economy

At the same time, Assad's capacity to exercise political and social control was enhanced with the expansion of the party's penetration in Syrian politics and society. The establishment under the Baath's leadership of a coalition of all the political parties with the name "National Progressive Front", gave the regime a free hand to patronize the affairs of the parliament. Complementarily, the selective incorporation of party elites into government positions reassured the parliament's support of the regime's authority. Furthermore, party-sponsored popular organizations were established within all social fields. Indicative examples among them were the General Union of Peasants, the General Federation of Syrian Women, the General Federation of Trade Unions, the General Federation of Artisans Associations, and the Revolutionary Youth Union (Salaymeh, 2018, p. 67). Perthes identifies these organizations as "corporatist bodies", whose functional but hierarchical relationship

headed by the Hafez's brother Rifaat al Assad until his attempted failed coup in 1984 and their subsequent disband.

³ Namely, the General Intelligence Directorate, the Political Security Directorate, the Military Intelligence Directorate, and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.

with the party, allowed the regime to flex and sustain its patrimonial domination. In other words, these organizations came to constitute the long arm of the regime within all strata of society in the sense that they could “*at the same time, represent, mobilize, and contain all important segments of the population*” (Perthes, 2000)

In the economic realm, Assad came to a position as Baath’s leader, where he could draw political legitimacy from the party’s ideological [socialist and nationalist] infrastructure and cultivate popular support. The continuity of previously implemented Baathist socialist policies played well for the regime. Namely, free access to education, major land reforms, food and fuel subsidies, and job security for industrial workers contributed to the shape of a cross-communal popular base among the peasantry and the working middle strata. Additionally, the massive expansion of the public sector⁴ rendered the state the biggest employer in Syria, thus increasing both the regime’s popularity and the reach of its patronage networks (Büchs, 2009, pp. 17-19; Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 53).

Moreover, Assad pursued calculated openings towards the previously marginalized Sunni bourgeoisie through the two “*infitah*” (the term refers to the opening of the public sector to private investment) between 1970 and 1990. The first *infitah* (1970) allowed the commercial Sunni elites to gain access to the state’s overwhelming economic resources and to initiate some -limited, yet unprecedented- profit. During the second *infitah*, however (around the mid-1980s), the private was allowed to partner with the public sector through limited and closely monitored privatizations. The subsequently resulting business partnerships between the -mostly Sunni- bourgeoisie and the -Alawi-dominated- state elites, generated an unprecedented “military-mercantile complex”. From what followed, the regime not only did not relinquish control over the economy, but it further expanded its patronage networks to the private sector through the creation of a new, regime-fed and -affiliated upper class (BTI, 2018; Büchs, 2009, p. 17-19). Nevertheless, despite whatever openings the Assad made to the commercial bourgeoisie, the middle and lower classes of citizens and peasants that profited by the Baathist socialist policies continued to constitute the main bulk of the regime’s popular support.

⁴ This includes the military, the security services, as well as the state public agencies and bureaucracy.

3.3 Ideological claims to political legitimacy

Parallel to securing control over the state's coercive apparatus, Hafez al Assad also engaged seriously in building his political legitimacy. As a Baathist himself, he stressed his coup's ideological alignment with the already dominant Baath party (Ma'oz & Yaniv, 1986, p.29). Further, with the constitutional (1973) establishment of Baath as the "vanguard party in the state and society" (Heller, 1974, p. 55), its principles emerged as the 'cornerstone' ideological claim of the Assad regime's political legitimacy. In other words, for the new regime, Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism constituted what Buzan calls the 'idea of the state', while the party itself would be its bearer on the country's political life. His Baathist devotion to Arab nationalism and the secular principles it entailed, was deemed instrumental to 'compensate' for the disproportionate 'Alawization' of the regime's and state's echelons; particularly since the majority of the Syrian population was -and still is- Sunni Muslims.⁵ Assad himself downplayed his sectarian identity by explicitly identifying as "A citizen of Syria [...] a member of the people [...] who has faith in the nation (Ma'oz & Yaniv, 1986, p.29). Given the regime's public discourse in support of the Baathist doctrinal Arabization of the population, any criticism towards the former's sectarian structuring could trigger the harsh response of the security apparatus (Matar, 2019, p. 2399; Salaymeh, 2018, p. 68). Meanwhile, the overtly minoritarian nature of the regime, in conjunction with other minorities' existential concerns, has allowed the former, as Stolleis put it, to project itself as the "*guarantor of peaceful coexistence among the various sectarian groups -because this coexistence was under threat by foreign "agents" who imported conflicts to generate mistrust, fear and physical conflict among the various groups*" (Stolleis, 2015, p. 8). However, despite branding his sectarian-based regime as nationalist, secular, and the protector of the minorities, Assad (as his son later on) was very cautious not to cross the high religiosity of the general population, as well as not to dissociate himself from the Syrian Sunni majority. Tellingly, he was eager to reinstate Islam's constitutional place as the President's religion and forged close ties with the Sunni *ulama*, in a rather dual

⁵ Although there are no reliable demographic data, most sources converge that the predominant religious group in the country is Sunni Muslims (75%), followed by Alawi Muslims (12%), Christians (10%), Druzes (3-4%), other Muslim denominations such as Ismailis and Twelvers (2%) and Yezidis (1%); for more see <https://minorityrights.org/country/syria/>

effort. Firstly, to demonstrate his awareness of Islam's importance for all Syrians, and secondly, to highlight the Alawis Muslim profile (Ma'oz & Yaniv, 1986, p. 30).

What also played a significant role in the Assad regime's political legitimacy was the consistent promulgation of its patriotic outlook, particularly against the threats posed by imperialism and Zionism. Throughout his rule, Assad's undeviating position on the Arab-Israeli conflict under the ideological framework of Arab nationalism helped forge the regime's profile as the defender of Arab rights (Perthes, 2000). What is more, that profile was even more reinforced after the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement in 1978, and indeed produced not only a high sentiment of national pride domestically, but also support for the regime that transcended the Syrian borders. Thus, Assad, at this point came to the position where he could cash in on Syria's role as the front-liner on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, strategic rents from the Gulf accounted for a varying but significant percentage of the government's revenue, with estimates putting it between 20 to 50 percent (Ehteshami et al, 2013, p. 226). Consequently, the regime was facilitated in supporting its nationalist foreign policy without overburdening the domestic statist economy, thus gaining significantly both in terms of political legitimacy and in the economic maintenance of the various patronage networks within the Syrian public sector. In addition, the regime translated its 'patriotically acquired' legitimacy into an extensive militarization effort that would shield the country from external threats. However, as Perthes have argued, that militarization, although reflected legitimate national concerns and constituted no controversial issue among the public opinion, was concurrently perceived by the regime as "a political and [domestic] security need" (Perthes, 2000).

3.4. Legitimacy through Personalism

Yet, while the party continued to be the primary tool for mobilization of support, its actual role as the cornerstone and source of the regime's ideological and political claims to legitimacy, gradually declined. Instead, as Assad concentrated power, the shaping of his personality cult gradually evolved into another claim to legitimacy, signaling all the more the personalization of his rule. A state- [regime-] sponsored

campaign through the media and public sector's initiatives, helped, by utilizing official and semi-official rhetoric, public messages, and political symbols, as Lisa Weeden puts it, to the creation of his image as "omnipresent and omniscient".⁶ The construction of Assad's persona intended to present him as patron of the state both ideally, as well as physically in the public domain (Weeden, 1999, p. 1; Salaymeh, 2018, p. 60). The party's penetration in society through the aforementioned popular organizations was also instrumental in spreading Assad's glorification discourse. At this point, a paradox can be fathomed. While the party as the carrier of the regime's political and ideological legitimacy gradually ceded ground, at the same time, it performed as the creative tool of the leader's personalistic claim to legitimacy. In conjunction with Baath's diminishing role in the decision-making, this would later lead to the contraction of the party's capacity to co-opt and mobilize large parts of the population.

In any case, Weeden again contends that in the Syrian case, the construction of Assad's cult did not ultimately manage to produce actual belief-based legitimacy. Instead, it was successful as a strategy of "*domination based on compliance*", in that it enforced over Syrians a frame of 'accepted' political and social behavior; one whose attendance falls completely under the scrutiny of the security services (Weeden, 1999, p. 6, 145). That way, the cult, regardless of its legitimization power, succeeds in cultivating the norms of accepted political and social expression to the point that serves the regime's security imperatives by diminishing the prospects of vocal dissent. Indeed, retrospectively, given the regime's firm grip on the security apparatus and its tight control over the public sphere, Assad's cult was effectively unrivaled to dominate the public discourse, to the point that it gave rise to the notion of "Assad's Syria" [*"Suriyet 'ul Assad"*]. The notion, widely used by loyalists and regime-affiliated media, implies that the Syrian nation is placed under the exclusive

⁶ "In official Syrian political discourse, President Hafiz al-Asad is regularly depicted as omnipresent and omniscient. In newspaper photographs he appears as the "father," the "combatant," the "first teacher," the "savior of Lebanon," the "leader forever," or the "gallant knight," a transparent reference to the modern-day Salah al-Din, after the original, who wrested Jerusalem from enemy control in 1187." Weeden, L. (1999). *Ambiguities of domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria*. University of Chicago Press.

possession [and guidance] of Assad -the “*eternal leader*”-, and his regime (Salaymeh, 2018, p. 51; Ismail, 2011, p. 542).

4. From Hafez to Bashar; what changed and what remained the same

With Hafez’s death, the country’s leadership was smoothly passed on to his son, Bashar. By that time, Syria had already been transformed from a coup-ravaged to a stable country, with the Assad regime standing unrivaled on the top after having withered severe internal challenges ranging from attempted coup to armed rebellion. Due to Hafez’s implementation of the previously presented regime security strategies, Bashar inherited a highly personalist, cohesive, and stable regime. His leadership enjoyed a relative political legitimacy -especially among the religious minorities-, firm control over the military and the security forces and significant social control capacities deriving from the operation of extensive patronage networks. Most importantly, though, Hafez’s creation of an exemplary neo-patrimonial administration had arguably transformed the state into his neo-patrimonial regime’s private fiefdom.

In many regards, Bashar retained the regime security configurations of his father. He continued to preside over an authoritarian regime that exercised power through a mix of repression and sectarian co-optation while also steadily emphasized his nationalist, secularist, and of course, personalist claims to legitimacy. Nevertheless, in what Bashar arguably differed the most from his father, was his initial self-branding as a ‘reformist’. While Hafez’s “Corrective movement” was more about reform towards stability, Bashar’s ‘reform’ allegedly emphasized in progress through modernization. In political and social affairs, the widespread popular expectations for change created by the new President’s early seeming openness to civil society and political reforms were refuted rather quickly. The so-called ‘Damascus Spring’ of 2000-2001 ended with the regime cracking down on reform movement leaders and oppositional press, in the name of ‘national unity and stability’ (Salamandra et al., 2015, pp. 4-6; Carnegie MEC, 2012). What he did change though was the sectarian balance in the military in favor of his co-sectarians. The armed forces’ political as well as military leadership was trusted predominantly to Alawis, while Sunni presence was further downgraded (Selvik, 2014, p. 3).

4.1 The economic ‘reform’ and religious maneuvers

In economic affairs, Bashar al-Assad can indeed be credited with accelerating the economic opening to the private sector that his father had reluctantly initiated back in 1985. While Bashar’s economic ‘new-deal’ was propagated internally as a major modernizing breakthrough, in essence, it was dictated by the growing inability of the regime to sustain Syria’s rigid statist economy. The economic ramifications of the country’s international isolation in 2003-2006 and the loss of access to strategic resources following the disengagement from Lebanon in 2005 aggravated the economic performance of the public sector. In this context, the redistributive capacity of the state, upon which the regime had based a large part of its ‘social pact’ with Syrians, was severely constrained (Donati, 2013, p.36). Hence, the shift to a model of ‘social market economy’ was considered as a survival strategy to secure strategic rents from a newly emerging private sector.

The change from a state-controlled economy to a ‘social market economy’, though, was carried out without a legal framework that would ensure future institutional capacity and administrative accountability (Sottimano, 2016, p. 454). Instead, the regime proceeded with ‘liberalizing’ the banking sector and external trade, while ‘distributing’ privatizations of state assets to a new generation of businessmen close to the President. The importance of this strategy was twofold. Firstly, Bashar al-Assad was framed by a new clientele of crony capitalists, loyal to him and dependent on his regime’s survival, albeit at the expense of Hafez’s reform-hostile old-guard of Sunni business elites. The most prominent example among the new business elite is Rami Makhoul, Bashar’s maternal cousin and Syria’s now ‘chief private investor’ (Donati, 2013, 37-39). Additionally, the regime’s 2007-initiative to create and encourage entrepreneurial participation in two major holding companies -namely, “Al-Cham” and “Al-Sourya”-, successfully cemented its patrimonial relation with the members of the new business bourgeoisie. In return for granting access to ministries and contracts, as well as protection to the holdings’ members, the regime benefited from political support and the setup of a renewed ‘military-mercantile complex’ (Donati, 2013, 41-42). Secondly, the concentration of capital in the hands of the regime’s inner circle [i.e., Makhoul] and the flow of important rents from the privatization of state resources, allowed the regime to relatively complement budget constraints and

support the continuous function of the increasingly gasping public sector. Further, apart from the generation of rents, the regime was in a position to claim credit from the modernization of infrastructure, albeit from 'private hands', and formulate specific output-based claims to legitimacy aiming at counterbalancing the actual retreat of the welfare state (Donati, 2013, pp. 43, 46).

The economy aside, in the religious field, Bashar followed a remarkably different path from his father that initially propped up his portrayal as a reformist. Following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, whatever gains the new regime's leadership extracted in terms of nationalist legitimacy from its anti-imperialist stance on the 2003 US invasion in Iraq begun to wither away. Hence, in seek of domestic popular support to back his legitimacy, Bashar pursued a 'strategic' opening towards the Islamist elements that had gradually reemerged in Syria since Hafez's death (Ward, 2017, p. 17; Heydemann et al., 2003, p. 19-20). His opening consisted of an effort to co-opt moderate Sunni clerics through appointments in positions of symbolic power, a cautious integration of religion into state institutions, and a set of highly symbolic popular-oriented measures which included among others the releases of Islamist prisoners and the sanction of public religious festivals. Further, Bashar himself, in the context of the creation of his own personalist 'cult' adopted a more pious profile, demonstrated through the media and his public speeches. Under these policies, Bashar al Assad managed to form a support base consisted of moderate -yet strictly non-politicized- Sunni Muslims (Ward, 2017, pp. 15-16; Pinto, 2017, p. 226). The introduction of such a form of 'religious nationalism' also enhanced the regime's identity-based legitimacy claims. Besides, it was framed accordingly, in order to promote national unity without either alarming the other religious minorities or challenging the state's secular character.

At this point, special mention deserves to the way Bashar's strategies of 'religious legitimacy' and 'neo-patrimonial economic reconfiguration' overlap. The 'liberalization' of the banking sector gave rise to Islamic financial institutions whose investment activities, in turn, attracted numerous middle-level entrepreneurs mostly of conservative Sunni background (Donati, 2013, p. 43). Pierret also highlights the leading Syrian *ulama* -with their distinctive bourgeois 'ethos'- crucial role in the welcoming of Islamic finance in Syria and the promotion of Sunni entrepreneurial

engagement in the ‘liberalized’ economy. The *ulama* interests on economic liberalization, albeit mainly as a counterbalance to secularism-associated statist model, did, in a sense, put them on the same page with the ruling elites. As a result, some of them were effectively co-opted by the regime. That only added to the regime’s capacities to patronize and exert vertical influence. Meanwhile, Assad also profited from the formation of a newly enriched Sunni merchant class with vested interests on his leadership’s stability and subsequent political survival (Pierret, 2015, pp. 145-146). The formation of that neo-patrimonial triangular relationship between the co-opted Sunni clergy, the conservative business elites, and the regime is quite interestingly depicted in a pamphlet published by Sunni cleric Yasir al-‘Ayti. *“The sheik thinks that by allying with the state official, he protects his jama’a, and that by joining with the merchant he protects his financial resources. The state official thinks that through his alliance with the sheik, he keeps the situation under control and that through his alliance with the merchant he takes a cut of the profits. The merchant believes his alliance with the state official ensures the support for his violations of the law, and that through his alliance with the sheik, he assures himself a place in the afterlife.”* (Pierret, 2013a, 161-162)

All in all, the creation and co-optation of new elites, both in the economic as well as in the religious domain led to the reconfiguration of existing loyalty networks. That process highlighted the personalization of Bashar’s rule, as well as his regime’s capacity to adjust in changing circumstances in order to maintain and even upgrade its neo-patrimonial dominion over crucial domains. However, the impact of Bashar’s ‘reforms’ in the economic and religious fields was double-edged. The ‘liberalization’ of the Syrian economy was effective in generating rents and new allies that boosted the regime’s security in the mid-term. Regardless it was overall insufficient in the long-term to curve the retreat of the welfare state upon which the regime had founded the cross-sectarian social pact with the Syrian peasantry and working-class was built (Donati, 2013, pp. 53-56). That meant that the rise in economic vulnerability alienated large segments of the population previously supportive of the regime. Its socialist credentials and Baathist legitimacy were severely hampered, a fact that also had a direct impact on the Party’s ideological appeal and relevance aside from any patronage functions (Abboud, 2016). Meanwhile, the deprivation of the economic power of the Hafez era’s commercial bourgeoisie generated further Sunni dissent, for

it was perceived as a direct outcome of upgraded Alawi control over the economy and the state (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 53-54). In the field of religion, the opening towards moderate Sunnis and the co-optation of part of the *ulama*, counterbalanced -to some extent- the regime's losses in socialist legitimacy. However, it also contributed to the growing presence and outspokenness of Islamist activists and non-affiliated *ulema*. The regime was quick in realizing that and undertook significant efforts to regulate accordingly through 'resecularization' measures and the expansion of the state's religious bureaucracy (Pierret, 2013b, p. 105-106). In the long term though, as was observed during the Syrian civil war, it was unable to completely prevent or control the re-emergence of Islamist elements within Syria.

5. Bashar al-Assad regime's resilience during the Syrian civil war

5.1 The early dynamics of the 2011 Syrian upheaval

In an interview he gave in Wall Street Journal in January 2011, Bashar al-Assad reiterated his belief that Syria was a stable country, primarily due to the leadership's proximity to the beliefs of the people (Wall Street Journal, 2011). In retrospect, his dismissal of a potential uprising of the likes of Tunisia and Egypt was more than an irony. In fact, it arguably echoed Zartman's assumption that incumbents tend to perceive "slippery slopes" as purely procedural in the greater context of politics, thus neglecting the existing problems' gravity until it is "*too late and difficult to prescribe measures*" (Zartman, 2019, p. 247).

The initial 2011 protests in Syria were non-violent, characterized by cross-sectarian participation, and mostly reflected popular grievances of political, social, and economic nature. The protesters called for Assad's resignation, the detachment of his cronies from the country's political and economic landscape, and the dismantling of the mukhabarat networks along with the regime in its entirety. In the face of the peaceful protests, the regime reacted rather incoherently by advancing a 'carrot and stick' strategy. It consisted of significant repression on the protesters in tandem with vague promises of national dialogue and political reform (Abboud, 2016). Such incoherence could be explained by the existence of intra-regime polarization between moderates and hard-liners. Hinnebusch, however, argues that should the President had sided with the moderates, increasing pressure and subsequent consensus on reforms would probably lead to the irreversible downfall of the regime (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 54-55). Nevertheless, the announced 'reforms' fell short in appeasing the protesters, while the disproportionate repression did nothing more than to inflame the uprising (Abboud, 2016).

As a matter of fact, the more the regime resorted to violence, the more the protesters began to contest the notion of Assad's Syria directly. The widespread use of unifying slogans such as "*Ash-sha'b Yurid Isqat an-Nizam*" ("the people want the fall of the regime") and "*Yallah Irhal Ya Bashar*" ("Depart oh Bashar") and the systematic

destruction of statues and pictures of the both Bashar and Hafez, signaled what Ismail describes as the attempt on behalf of the protesters to “re-imagine” the nation. Such highly symbolic acts underscored the protesters' endeavor to redefine nationhood away from the until-then regime-cultivated and imposed ideological and political norms. (Ismail, 2011, pp. 542, 547). However, as the protests persisted and the uprising began to turn into armed conflict, what was probably most alarming for the regime, aside from its political and ideological delegitimization, was the emergence of entities that assumed governance responsibilities in areas outside the former's control. Since the very early phases of the uprising in Syria, the protesters began to form grassroots initiatives known as ‘Local Coordination Committees’ (LCC), which acted as organization and mobilization platforms (Abboud, 2016). While their role was limited in the dissemination of information, organization of protests, and -later- the provision of emergency healthcare, they also arguably served as the precursors of the ‘Local Councils’ (LC). The Local Councils were formed as self-managed entities in the same spontaneous manner as the Local Coordination Committees, and as was mentioned above, in areas where the regime has lost or relinquished control. There, usually in cooperation with the various LCCs, they started to operate in the context of responding to the fundamental needs of the population. Among other things, they engaged in the provision of healthcare, education, and housing for the internally displaced persons, while gradually also assumed municipal responsibilities. The supporting rationale of their formation was that the revolutionary forces should push forward with the organization of their society independently from the state, in order to create viable alternative governance structures and counter the regime's administrative monopoly. Indeed, initially, the Local Councils constituted -even in their infancy- prominent localized alternatives to the regime's administration. (Narbone et al., 2016, pp. 7-8; Abboud, 2016). Moreover, as the uprising was gradually militarized, several armed groups, mostly of Islamist and Salafi background also started to develop their own administrative structures largely -though not entirely- in competition to the LCs. Having access to income due to their engagement in war-profiteering and a relatively steady access to foreign aid -which both lacked the LCs-, they gradually came in a position to provide welfare services themselves, as well as to set up institutions to perform administrative and judicial functions such as Shura councils and Shari'a courts respectively (Abboud, 2016; Narbone et al., 2016, pp. 13; Khalaf, 2015, p. 46)

In this general context becomes evident that the situation fitted Buzan's description of contestation of both the state's "idea" -in the form of the regime's organizational ideology- and "institutional expression" -as it has been set-up and modified to serve the regime's type of governance". Consequently, the regime realized the urgent need for formulating new security strategies.

5.2 The 'sectarianization' of the opposition

Initially, as was earlier mentioned, the protest movement was concentrated in socio-political demands and was defined by its cross-sectarian inclusiveness. That was deemed to forcefully challenging the regime's nationalist legitimacy. To be fair, the use of religious symbols and slogans was not absent during the initial phase of the protest movement, but as Pinto notes, it did not indicate a high presence of radicals. Instead, it could be considered as a legitimate expression of the 'religious nationalism' Bashar had promoted in recent years. Besides, the initial participation of many members of minorities -namely Christians, Druzes, and Ismailis- was indicative of the cross-sectarian and inclusive character of the protests. (Pinto, 2017, pp.126-127).

In its 'legitimacy counterattack', the regime from early on chose deliberately to portray the protesters as religious fanatics, while in parallel tried to 'strengthen', or at least give prominence to the radical elements within the movement. By instrumentalizing sectarianism, it aimed to breach the protests' inclusive character and inject them, in turn, with militant Islamist traits, thus scaring the minorities and moderate Sunnis away. Meanwhile, the regime drew from the support the protests had attracted, especially from Western countries as well as from the Arab League,⁷ in order to make the case of a foreign conspiracy against Syria -'the cradle' of the Arab world's resistance against western imperialism and Islamic terrorism. In other words, Assad tried to revive his regime's Baathist nationalist and secular legitimacy as the

⁷ From the very early stages of the Syrian uprising, the USA, France, Germany, the UK and the EU, along with the Arab League -whose member was also Syria until November 2011- had repeatedly called Assad to step down in favor of a political transition in the country. For more see: (BBC News, 2011; Goldman, 2012; Batty & Shenker, 2011)

guarantor of national unity and the protector of the minorities (Matar, 2019, pp. 2408-2411).

To that end, the regime advanced with a series of tactics that consistently promulgated the 'sectarian' character of the protesters. These included the spread of rumors of sectarian attacks to minority communities in various localities (Darwisheh, 2013); the rhetorical incrimination of the religious language used in the protests and the pointing to the mosques where the protesters gathered to organize as 'jihadist nests' (Pinto, 2017, pp. 126-127); and an intensive [state] media campaign that engaged in omitting or changing facts about the protests while promoting the regime's narrative about a well-organized foreign conspiracy. In addition,, the regime established the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a hacker group, tasked on the one hand with fighting the opposition's outlets -or individuals- on the internet via smearing campaigns, and on the other, with disseminating the regime's narrative of the 'Nation under attack' (Matar, 2019, pp. 2403-2405).

However, apart from the consistent fearmongering, should the regime aspired to adequately substantiate ideological claims to legitimacy and mobilize its supporters, the demonstration of concrete evidence of the protesters' militant sectarian 'credentials' was deemed necessary. In that direction, it employed from early on excessive repression in order not to merely quell dissent, but to incite a violent counter-response from parts of the protesters, and hence to delegitimize them on allegedly sectarian grounds (Darwisheh, 2013). During the relentless mukhabarat crackdown on the protests, protesters of Sunni background were systematically and excessively targeted, thus exacerbating dissent along sectarian lines. The participation of regime-affiliated individuals (mainly of Alawi background) called "*Shabiha*" (ghosts/thugs) in the crackdown, provoked further indignation towards what was increasingly the perception of an Alawi-sponsored anti-Sunni crackdown. Gradually, the regime's tactic proved fruitful. Large parts of the protesters began to mobilize increasingly along sectarian lines, towards a more Islamist and militant anti-Alawi discourse, and small armed groups began to surface as a response to the regime's violence (Pinto, 2017, p.135-137). Under these conditions, the amnesty granted by Assad in the summer of 2011 in the context of his 'appeasement' effort, conspicuously reinforced the radicals' presence in the early stages of the uprising

through the release of 200 Jihadist. Tellingly several among them assumed active roles in the civil war that followed. (Ossorio, 2019, p. 52; Cordall, 2014).

In support of its ‘international conspiracy’ narrative and in the effort to attract the solidarity of the minorities, the regime also became the ‘beneficiary’ of the sectarian rhetoric of part of the ulama in exile. More specifically, radical Sunni clerics such as ‘Adnan al-‘Arour, Abu Basir al-Tartusi, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, vigorously called for Muslims to take up arms against the regime and its followers (with the first distinctly hinting to Alawis), as also did al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in February 2012 (Ossorio, 2019, pp. 51-52). Their calls influenced to no small extent the influx of foreign Sunni fighters in Syria. According to Zelin’s and Hegghammer’s estimations, even since the early stages of the conflict between 2011 and 2013, approximately 5.000 fighters from 60 countries had joined the Syrian rebels (Hegghammer & Zelin, 2013). Moreover, the active involvement of the London-based Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the formation process of the oppositional Syrian National Council in Turkey (2011), further fed into the regime’s nationalist and anti-sectarian narrative, which attempted to blur the boundaries between moderate and extremist opposition forces (Pinto, 2017, pp. 133-134)

All the above-mentioned, combined with the uprising’s increasingly sectarian dynamics as expressed domestically through the proliferation of militant Islamist slogans against the regime, and its minority supporters and international allies -Iran and Hezbollah-, indeed exacerbated fears of sectarian -and particularly anti-Shia- violence among minorities (Pinto, 2017, p. 132-134). Under such conditions of extreme polarization, Assad came to a position to revitalize his cult’s appeal among his supporters and draw legitimacy from it; a fact that became evident in pro-regime rallies where loyalists made regular references to the leader’s imagery through personalistic slogans (Ezzi, 2015, pp. 39-40, 45; Sabbagh, 2015, pp. 77, 79). In this context, Hinnebusch accurately points out that the regime’s strategy of “demonizing the opposition” by instrumentalizing sectarianism was rather successful (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 55-57). Assad managed at first to mobilize Alawis’ support -and to be sure, not all of them were adamant supporters of his- by playing on their existential fears in case of a potential Islamist takeover. (Balanche, 2018, p. 14) Most importantly, though, he managed to alienate the other religious minorities and a considerable part

of the secular Sunnis and from the protest movement and even provoke counter-mobilization (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 55-57). The most demonstrative example of this success was arguably the shift in the stance of Christians towards the uprising.

Christians were well divided into taking sides in the early phase of the uprising. On the one hand, many Christians, especially youth, participated actively in the demonstrations against the regime, as was mentioned earlier in the thesis and were even aspirant of a regime change similar to Egypt and Tunisia. On the other hand, the high Christian clergy, holding traditionally good and institutionalized relations with the regime, threw its support behind the President almost unanimously and in a manner somewhat arbitrary regarding the inclusiveness of their flock's political affiliations (Fahmi, 2018, pp. 50-52). However, as the protests were moving all the more along sectarian lines due to the regime's vindictive repression, the Christian majority adopted a more non-confrontational stance vis-à-vis the regime. Moving to the opposite direction would undoubtedly be interpreted as a push for regime change and turn them into targets for the army and the security services -not to mention the few conciliation possibilities with radical Islamist elements-. The rationale of this favorable for the status quo neutrality can also be attributed to the bitter experiences of Christians in post-regime change Iraq, where following the fall of the Baathists, they faced severe persecution by Salafi extremists (Tasopoulos, 2014, p. 8).

5.3 The regime's militarization strategy and the role of the Syrian Arab Army

The emergence of armed self-defense groups as a result of the regime's excessive repression led to the generation of counter-violence from all sides. Although from a military perspective, the conflict was spiraling out of Damascus' control, that outcome was arguably beneficial for the regime for two main reasons. Firstly, the mobilization of Assad's loyalists was accelerated. Secondly, because the government came in a position to dodge any prospect of negotiations and compromise by advancing into the familiar strategy of militarization, thus legitimizing the use of force against its opponents (Darwisheh, 2013). Since the early stages of the uprising, this strategy of militarization, albeit in its infancy, was particularly illustrated by the

regime's eagerness to arm those who considered loyal and organize them into militia-styled groups called "*Popular Committees*" ("*Lihan Shabiha*")⁸ (Lund, 2015). In this 'recruitment' process that Lund has called the "militiafication" of "Assad's Syria", the regime employed not only the intelligence services but its networks of affiliated businessmen as well. Among many others, Rami Makhlouf, the President's maternal cousin, represents an indicative case of businessman-sponsor of Popular Committees. Makhlouf found the charity foundation "*Al-Bustan*" via which he provided funding to the shabiha and social services to their families should a member of the former '*martyred*' for the regime. Al Bustan also established an armed wing comprised predominantly by Alawis (Khaddour, 2014; Nakkash, 2013, p.10).

At this point, it is imperative to underline that despite the dominant presence of Alawis in Popular Committees that further provoked the counter-sectarianization of the opposition, the actual groups' composition reflected the regime's cross-sectarian support base. Indicatively in Damascus' Jaramana area, Popular committees were made up by Druzes, while in Wadi al-Nasara by Christians and in Aleppo by Sunnis (Lund, 2015; Khaddour, 2014). Be that as it may, though, the "militiafication" of the government supporters evolved in parallel to the increasing militarization -and sectarianization- of the opposition, hence entrapping all sides into a civil war where the stance of the army would play the leading role in the regime's survival.

The active involvement of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to the brutal crackdown on the uprising, and on Sunnis in particular, quickly began to take a significant toll in terms of both defections and casualties during confrontations with armed rebel groups. That was evidently reflected in the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in June 2011 out of 'brigades' formed by mostly Sunni SAA defectors, as well as in the formation of various Islamist rebel groups that drew significant numbers of recruits from the former's ranks later on during the civil war (Abboud, 2016; Ossorio, 2019, p. 52).⁹

⁸ Sammer N. Abboud distinguishes between *Shabiha* and *Lijan Shabiha*, in the sense that the latter were the byproduct of the former's organization into more coherent formations with the aim of protecting their neighborhoods from opposition groups reprisals.

⁹ Salafi and Salafi Jihadist groups that had or still have significant participation in the civil war, such as Jaysh al-Islam, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), and Ahrar al-Sham grew

However, contrary to the rebels who were characterized by large divisions and infighting throughout the civil war, and despite the high level of defections, the SAA maintained its coherence -albeit not its vitality- while siding with the regime from the beginning of the uprising. That can be explained to a large extent by the fact that while the majority of defectors were Sunni Arabs among the rank and file and low to middle-level officers, little defections occurred in the higher echelons of the SAA. The staunch support of the military's top leadership reveals that the regime's security strategies of sectarian accommodation and co-optation in the military the past forty years had indeed paid off (Khaddour, 2016, p.1). Nevertheless, despite the unbreached neo-patrimonial relation between the leadership of the military and the regime, the remaining majority of soldiers was -and still is- Sunnis, albeit the balance is shifting all the more in favor of Alawis due to mass recruitment (Zambelis, 2015, p. 8; Khaddour, 2016, pp. 7-8). That fact that kept the regime in constant anxiety of preventing further defections. Hence, it leveraged all the four intelligence services to monitor and prevent dissent within the army and enforce compliance through the ranks. A telling case-example was the placing of Brigadier General of the Republican Guard Manaf Tlass -son of Hafez's Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass- into house detention, only a while before his defection. For the same reason, the regime, according to Holliday's relevant study, relied heavily on tactics of selective deployment. It regularly deployed a mix of conventional units with loyal ones -mainly Alawi- and combined with segments of the elite 'praetorian' units. That resulted in marginalizing a large part of the army's total force. In conjunction with that, and by also considering the level of defections and battle casualties, Holliday points to the fact that the SAA as early as since 2011 was relying upon the one-third of its full force of 220.000 men (Holliday, 2013, pp. 12-13, 27).

The regime, in order to compensate for severe manpower shortages, engaged in the institutionalization of the various armed loyalist groups. That process arguably amounted to the "militiafication's" upgrade into a more coherent militarization strategy. The observation of how the regime advanced the transformation of the "National Defense Force" (NDF), from an ordinary militia to an umbrella

significantly in size since 2012 by recruiting FSA defectors due to access to better foreign funding and combat efficiency.

organization for the nationwide incorporation of various Popular Committees, is highly revealing on this strategy (Lund, 2015).¹⁰ What is more, the institutionalization of the NDF -and other militias- underscores the regime's ability to leverage its patronage networks. Most importantly, though, it represents a testament for the latter's recombinant capacities in forging new patronage networks in support of the status-quo in war-time and maybe beyond that.

Established in 2012 in Homs, the NDF quickly spread across the country. The regime identified the potential of the NDF's institutionalization as auxiliary to the SAA, and therefore, it gradually provided recognition, as well as administrative and material support. The NDF was also granted government facilities for administration and training purposes, and its officers are being trained or appointed by the army. Moreover, since enlisting in such groups is considered to substitute the regular military service, they have become an attractive option for pro-regime fighters. Joining the NDF, for instance, is preferred by youth who want to stay close to their communities and enjoy a state salary, while can also engage in war-profiteering, mainly as a means to compensate for the state's often inability to provide salaries in a regular frequency (Khaddour, 2016, pp.4-8; Leenders & Giustozzi, 2019, p. 15). While the organization was -according to various sources- receiving significant Iranian financial and training support, that support began to decline steadily since 2015. Consequently, the NDF's chief sponsor continues to be the regime, which provides training and funding via the SAA and loyalist businessmen (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2019, pp. 8-9). Apart from the NDF, telling for the participation of regime-affiliated businessmen in raising militias is again the case of Rami Makhlof who has allegedly fund the creation of the elite unit called "*Tiger Forces*", along with Mohammad Jabr who has created the "*Desert Falcons*" group (Khaddour, 2016, pp. 3,5).

¹⁰ The only other institutionalized pro-regime militia in the country with nationwide structure are the Baath Battalions which constitute the official armed wing of the Party. Other pro-regime militias also exist but their numbers are significantly lower and their presence is merely localized; namely the "Jerusalem Brigade" in Aleppo consisted mainly by Palestinian refugees and a militia formation controlled by the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party comprised mainly by Christians in the broader area of Homs. For more see; Lund, 2015

Regardless, given that the institutionalization of militias does not take place within, but parallel to the army, the regime is usually thorough enough not to allow, or at least to contain potential inter-institutional tensions. Therefore, it keeps such groups under constant scrutiny, controls their transfers of equipment according to needs on the ground, and intervenes in cases of tensions between militia groups and SAA units (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2019, p. 14-15). On the opposite side of the ‘institutionalization’ spectrum, since the size of such groups grew steadily stronger, the regime initiated the enmeshing of the militia fighters’ families into the state institutions in order to incorporate them in its patronage networks and link them inextricably to its survival. The establishment in 2013 of the “Syrian Martyrs’ Association” to provide social services to the families of ‘martyred’ fighters is suggestive of that effort. In the same context, a December 2014 Presidential Decree, allocated 50 percent all state jobs -although with non-retroactive effect- to family members of ‘martyrs’ from the security establishment and militias (Lund, 2015; Khaddour, 2014). Under a similar rationale, the regime has effectively co-opted many local leaders of militia organizations -and from the NDF par excellence-, to assure not only compliance but also un-conditional loyalty. Various militia-linked figures also run in parliamentary elections in 2012 and 2016, under formations led by some of the regime’s business cronies (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2019, p. 16). By such moves, one could assume that the government attempts to set the basis for a new regime-militia relationship. One that runs parallel to the already effective regime-military relationship, and is complementary but also potentially counter-balancing to the latter should future circumstances demand it.

5.4 The preservation of the regime’s ‘institutional expression of the state’

As was presented earlier in this thesis, apart from the uprising’s direct ‘assault’ on the regime’s political and ideological legitimacy, Damascus had to cope also with the establishment of new institutions and forms of governance by the rebels. For should the rebels were left unconstrained in developing alternative forms of governance, their potential effectiveness could irreversibly breach Damascus’ monopoly in what Martínez and Eng term as “*performing the state*” (i.e., “*the enactment of state-like functions*”) (Martínez & Eng, 2018, p. 237). Fundamentally, such an outcome entails

both short- to middle-term and middle- to long-term implications. In the short- to middle-term, especially when armed rebels are involved, effective rebel governance can be translated into rising economic resources for the insurgency; increased civilian cooperation due to guaranteed security; and ultimately and most importantly, fresh recruits. In the middle- to long-term, though, effective alternative forms of governance would most probably render the Assad regime's cultivated "institutional expression of the state" obsolete and result in the collapse of its governing legitimacy. To avert such a potential scenario, Damascus, has since the beginning pursued two different, but overlapping strategies.

5.4.1 Holding the state 'hostage'

Damascus' first strategy aimed at solidifying the precious for the regime 'state-civilian' interdependence through the preservation -to the best extent possible- of the uninterrupted function of the state's bureaucracy. To that end, since the early stages of the conflict, key government institutions, administrative agencies, and public services were painstakingly relocated to urban areas that were heavily defended by the SAA. That move gave the regime the capacity to continue providing state services, such as paying salaries, issuing legal documents, providing bread and fuel subsidies, as well as healthcare and education services. It is important to note also that the government continued to provide such services even to civilians residing in various rebel-held areas [provided that these areas were not under siege] (Khaddour, 2015, p. 5).

Needless to say, though, the provision of services and resources was systematically carried out in a rather 'strategically' discriminating manner against civilians whom the regime considered as opposition supporters. For instance, opposition sympathizers residing within regime territory were often either persecuted or fired from their jobs (if employed by the public sector) (Khaddour, 2015, p. 7). Civilians from opposition-controlled areas who needed to collect salaries and subsidies, or even issue official documents, were able to do so only from within regime-controlled areas. However, access to such areas entailed the crossing of numerous army- and mukhabarat-manned checkpoints. That fact, often either disincentivized the attempt to move across areas or incentivized the internal displacement of civilians towards regime-held areas, out of necessity. On the one hand, in cases where the movement was disincentivized, transactions between civilians and state employees or officials were often concluded

by illegal methods and via intermediaries and smugglers. As a result, the regime benefited both economically from the rampant corruption, and in terms of further solidifying its patronage networks through the development of vertical clientelism between state officials and civilians (Khaddour, 2015, p. 5-7). On the other hand, the displacement of civilians towards government-controlled areas was, arguably, merely complementing the regime's narrative about the conditions of reoccurring normalcy out of the 'terrorist'-held areas. Most importantly, however, Assad's preservation of control over the bureaucracy and public services acted as a constant reminder to Syrians about 'who runs and keeps the state together'; a reminder that constituted the regime's fundamental -yet tenuous at best- output-based claim to legitimacy.

5.4.2 The 'strangling' of rebel governance

The maneuvers that the regime undertook to preserve its hold on the state's bureaucracy were indeed effective in the sense that they helped it to avoid the crumbling of its capacity to "perform the state". Nevertheless, they naturally did not suffice *per se* to guarantee the non-emergence of alternative governance initiatives in rebel-held areas. On the contrary, it was that kind of 'centralization' advanced by the government that generated an administrative vacuum, and hence 'encouraged' the establishment of alternative governance institutions (Yazigi, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, the regime's alerting insecurity on that matter was translated in a relentless counterinsurgency strategy, the aim of which was to suffocate any emerging governance alternative, by depriving the rebels of their capacities to provide social services, but most of all, security to the population.

Since the SAA was rather not in a position to regularly carry out direct assaults against the rebels -due to manpower and equipment shortages-, Damascus focused on aerial and artillery bombardments and sieges. The Syrian Air Force (SAF) -joined by their Russian allies from 2015 onwards- apart from military targets, engaged specifically and tactically civilian infrastructures such as bread production and distribution points, medical and water treatment facilities, and even schools (Lawley, 2019; Suter, 2017). Strike patterns of bakeries and especially hospitals have been identified by researchers in various rebel-held cities [or governorates] such as Aleppo, Dar'a and Homs. The government's motivation in targeting the rebels' healthcare and bread production facilities can be fathomed, should someone consider the traditional

role of welfare provision in the regime's Baathist social pact with Syrians. (Martínez & Eng, 2018, 243-246). For the regime, after all, it is imperative to present itself as the sole legitimate implementor of any social pact. In the healthcare field in particular, the criminalization of any medical assistance to members of the opposition under the 2012 counter-terrorism law, clearly illustrates the broader context within which the regime targets medical staff and facilities (Gladstone & Browne, 2019). According to a research conducted by 'Physicians for Human Rights', an NGO, the regime is responsible for 91 percent of the strikes against medical facilities throughout Syria between 2011-2019 (Physicians for Human Rights, 2019). Moreover, the regime has reportedly made use of 'barrel bombs' in the targeting of civilian infrastructure in rebel-held neighborhoods. The use of that kind of weapon, which is notorious of the random and devastating damage it inflicts, further underscored the government's intentions to severe the living conditions among the population and prevent conditions of normalcy that would allow the evolution of rebel governance (Khaddour, 2015, pp. 10, 15). The success of the regime's bombing campaign against rebel governance was evident in the case of eastern Aleppo. According to Khaddour, the regime's use of barrel bombs was mostly responsible for the destruction of the opposition's abilities to provide services, the freeze of development projects by foreign sponsors and NGOs, and the ultimate displacement of 600.000 civilians towards the regime-controlled areas of the city (Khaddour, 2015, p. 10).

Similarly to the aerial and artillery bombardments, the sieges imposed by regime forces on several cities and villages served the very same purpose. By besieging rebel-controlled cities and villages, Damascus has regularly put entire populations in front of the dilemma of capitulating or being extinguished by starvation and lack of healthcare. In fact, by cutting-off all access points of entering or leaving the cities, the regime gradually drained entire cities, villages, or neighborhoods even of the most vital resources (Mazen, 2018, pp. 3, 5). Under such circumstances, the population's living conditions were becoming unbearable, to the point that any achievements in alternative forms of governance are rendered meaningless. The case of eastern Ghouta stands out as a prime example of the regime's employment of siege tactics and their results. In eastern Ghouta, various LCs and armed rebel groups had managed to develop remarkable administrative institutions, capable of performing a variety of state functions despite the often conflictual relations between them (Angelova,

2014).¹¹ However, in 2013 the SAA laid siege to the city, thus preventing even the deliveries of humanitarian aid from the UN and Syrian Arab Crescent while allowing the movement of goods only via one crossing, the monopoly rights of which were granted to a regime crony. That, in conjunction with sporadic bombardments, led to the deterioration of the humanitarian conditions to the point that in November 2017, a UN survey concluded that 11.9 percent of children under five were suffering from severe malnutrition, while 36 percent were suffering from stunted growth (Lund, 2018). The siege of Eastern Ghouta reached the end in 2018, with an agreement for the “evacuation” of all residents and the complete dissolve of all the LCs that operated in the area, under the primary rationale that they constituted direct challenge the regime’s state institutions and authority (Mazen, 2018, p. 5; Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017, p. 4) Similar conditions faced the population in numerous other cities and villages such as Daraya, Zabadani, and Madaya (Mazen, 2018, p. 5; Ahmed, 2016).

Although the ultimate purpose of bombardment and besiegement may be the same, the latter arguably differs significantly from the former since it has provided the regime with several ‘opportunities’ in the process. First and foremost, apart from the army’s obvious benefit of manpower conservation, the sieges allowed the regime to negotiate with the rebels while at the same time using excessive force to extract concessions from a position of power (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017, p. 2). Secondly, protracted sieges such as that of eastern Ghouta, have brought considerable profits to local traders, soldiers, militias and regime-cronies who actively engaged in activities of war-profiteering, namely by collecting bribes and smuggling goods in besieged areas. An indicative example of this reality was the so-called “1million Crossing” (Syrian Pounds per hour) -as the Wafideen checkpoint in eastern Ghouta was called due to the revenue soldiers received through bribes-. The regime was indeed able to extract some benefit from protracted sieges, initially in the form of cuts in the share of war-profiteers, but mainly by enlarging its networks of cronies by distributing contracts to supply goods in besieged areas (Todman, 2016, pp. 1-5). Third, successful sieges have arguably allowed Assad to project his legitimacy claims to his supporters both in terms of leadership efficiency -in the fight against ‘terrorism’- and

¹¹ Parts of Three armed rebel groups were located in Eastern Ghouta; Jaysh al-Islam, Filaq al-Rahman and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. For more see: Lund, 2018

in terms of revitalizing the ‘appeal’ of his cult. That has become evident through the picture of confidence presented by the regime’s media, which increasingly makes the case of the once-impossible now-imminent military victory (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017, p. 3). Finally, though and most importantly, by enforcing the so-called “reconciliation agreements” following the eventual capitulation of the rebel forces in specific areas, the regime was able to set its terms on the opposition. These terms, while usually varied according to each occasion (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017, p. 7-11), were mainly related to the extraction of guarantees on behalf of the rebels and civilians in a form that highly resembled pledges of loyalty. Sosnowski has described the reconciliation agreements as “strange contracts”, which effectively compel people to designate themselves as either collaborators or defectors, in order to be decided if they will remain in their desired areas of residence or they will be ‘evacuated’ in other rebel-held territories, probably closer to Idlib (Sosnowski, 2019, pp. 7-9).¹² For those who ultimately get to stay in their areas, the regime can claim their “pacification” and “reconciliation” and probably use it to bolster its output-based claims to legitimacy. For those who refuse to comply with the regime, however, the ‘evacuations’ to Idlib arguably serve as a ‘merge and discredit’ strategy in order to further de-legitimize their choice and legitimize further use of force against them on the familiar grounds of ‘terrorism’.

5.4.3 Assad’s ‘selective approach’ on fighting fronts

Although the regime’s primary survival strategy was to thwart or dismantle any alternative form of governance or administrative institution that would derive from rebel initiatives, paradoxically its approach towards the two other major players in the Syrian conflict, the Kurds and Daesh (ISIS) was fundamentally different.

While the regime unleashed hell on the opposition’s governance initiatives, at the same time, it allowed the Kurds of northern Syria to develop their very own autonomous administration unconstrained. Damascus’ flexibility on the issue can to a large extent be explained by the stance adopted by the Kurdish majority during the outbreak of the uprising. Although Kurds had participated in the protest movement

¹² Until the time these lines are being written, the area of the Idlib governorate remains written the last stronghold of the armed opposition within Syria.

and oppositional structures, the Kurdish political parties, and especially the largest among them, the PYD, intentionally chose to remain neutral (Abboud, 2016). Despite the long history of repression of their cultural and civil rights under the Assad rule, the rising sectarianization of the opposition, along with the staunch support that it received from Turkey, rendered the Kurds quite reluctant to push for regime change (Healy, 2012). Under such conditions of stability in the Kurdish areas, the government was able to redeploy most of its units to other, more active fronts, while maintaining a minimal military presence and continuing to perform some critical administrative functions (Khaddour, 2015, pp.11-12). Consequently, the Kurds were free to follow a more autonomous path that culminated in the establishment of the “Democratic Autonomous Administration” under a new constitution in 2014 (Aldarwish, 2016, pp.17-18).

Regardless, the growing Kurdish autonomy did not breach the ‘tacit non-aggression pact’ between the regime and the Kurds, precisely because it was serving much as a ‘burden relief’ and was giving the former the flexibility to fight elsewhere. Even more to that direction, Assad’s non-confrontational approach towards the Kurds arguably helped to create another solid front as a ‘bulwark’ against the rapid expansion of ISIS. However, although at the peak of its power, ISIS had conquered vast areas, had established numerous institutions to “perform the state”, and had a long record in committing atrocities, the regime did not confront it with the same ferocity it confronted other rebel groups. In fact, according to reports, fighting ISIS was low in the regime’s agenda (The New Arab, 2013). That has led many analysts to point to a conspicuous relation between the organization and the regime (Al-Tamimi, 2014). Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated in this thesis, the Syrian government presumably ‘needed’ such ultra-radical alternatives of the likes of ISIS, in order to promulgate its ideological claims to legitimacy in the most persuasive manner possible. ISIS, retrospectively, indeed proved to be the factor that enabled the regime to re-imagine itself as the ‘lesser-evil’ (Walt, 2019). Therefore, Assad may not ‘invented’ ISIS, but to be sure, he took advantage of the organization’s trajectory in order to promote his regime’s legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explore the internal factors that contributed to President Bashar al-Assad's regime resilience during the Syrian civil war. To be sure, trying to explain the current regime's resilience solely through the lenses of the security strategies implemented by Bashar al-Assad since the beginning of the uprising would not provide a full picture. Instead, a more comprehensive approach is in order; one that also takes into account the nature of the regime as shaped by Hafez al-Assad's innenpolitik during his thirty years rule. Through the implementation of a series of internally oriented security strategies that heavily involved sectarian accommodation and cooptation, Hafez al-Assad had managed to set up and maintain a quintessentially neo-patrimonial regime whose inner circle was sharing solidarity bonds based on kinship and family. The regime under Hafez developed deep patronage networks within the state institutions, high social control capacities, a well-cultivated popular legitimacy and most importantly, a cohesive and coup-proofed coercive apparatus. Most of the current regime's self-preservation mechanisms that were activated during the Syrian uprising and the civil war had indeed been put in place under Hafez al-Assad's endeavor to mitigate his regime's insecurity by shielding it from internal challenges. However, in combination with all the above, Bashar's advanced recalibrations of critical regime security strategies have also arguably played a central role in the regime's survival. In fact, it is debatable whether the regime would have survived the protests having neither the enormous financial support of a new generation of crony capitalists nor the advantage of a highly divided Sunni Arab majority.

When the 'Arab Spring' wave of protests knocked on Syria's door, Assad's choice to go 'all-in' with violent repression was rather revealing that the regime had neither the institutional capacity nor the economic resources and political will to respond constructively to the protests' demands for political reform. Therefore, in order to survive, Bashar fully 'recycled' all the regime security strategies effectively implemented by his father in the past. These included extensive repression, militarization, diversionary tactics related to foreign conspiracies, and needless to say, the instrumentalization of sectarianism in order to incite sectarian violence and legitimize the aforementioned strategies altogether. However, it is essential to

underscore that aside from all these and the crucial role of the army's coherence and loyalty, what the regime exhibited during the civil war, was its high capacities to adapt and to maneuver in periods of protracted crisis. Indicative of the regime's recombinant capacities has been its ability to create newer and larger patronage networks during wartime, therefore not only preserving its neo-patrimonial character but also further consolidating it. Moreover, it exhibited a remarkable coherence and consistency in the propagation of its claims to legitimacy -namely the identification as the secular protector of the minorities- in every single step of the civil war's trajectory. Finally, all the above mentioned, in conjunction with the ruthless determination to survive -even to the utmost expense of the Syrian people and the state- have rendered Bashar al-Assad's regime not only capable of fighting, but also a reliable ally for its international backers to invest in.

Bibliography

Abboud, S. N. (2016). *Syria*. Hot spots in global politics. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Ayoob, M. (1992). The Security Predicament of the Third World State: Reflections on State Making in a Comparative Perspective. In B. Job (Ed.), *The Insecurity Dilemma* (pp. 63–80). Lyenne Rienner Publishers.

Buzan, B. (1983). *People, states, and fear: The national security problem in international relations*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

Donati, C. (2013). *The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria: Liberalization and the Reconfiguration of Economic Networks*. In S. Heydemann & R. Leenders, Middle East Authoritarianisms. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Ehteshami, E., Hinnebusch, R., Heidi, H., Raunio, P., Warnaar, M., & Zintl, T. (2013). Authoritarian Governance in Syria and Iran: Challenged, Reconfiguring, and Resilient. In S. Heydemann & R. Leenders (Eds.), *Middle East authoritarianisms: Governance, contestation, and regime resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and cultures (pp. 222–242). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Heydemann, S., & Leenders, R. (Eds.). (2013). Authoritarian Governance in Syria and Iran: Challenged, Reconfiguring, and Resilient. In *Middle East authoritarianisms: Governance, contestation, and regime resilience in Syria and Iran*. Stanford University Press.

Jackson, R. (15). Regime Security. *Contemporary Security Studies* (4th ed., pp. 161–173). Oxford University Press.

Job, B. (1992). *The Insecurity Dilemma*. Lyenne Rienner Publishers.

Ma'oz, M., & Yaniv, A. (1986). *Syria Under Assad*. Routledge Library Editions: Syria. Routledge.

- Migdal, J. S. (1988). *Strong Societies and Weak States*. Princeton University Press.
- Pierret, T. (2013). The state management of religion in Syria. In S. Heydemann & R. Leenders (Eds.), *Middle East authoritarianisms: Governance, contestation, and regime resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and cultures (pp. 83–106). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Pierret, T. (2013a). *Religion and State in Syria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pierret, T. (2015). Merchant Background, Bourgeois Ethics. In C. Salamandra & L. Stenberg (Eds.), *Syria from reform to revolt*, Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East (First edition., Vols. 1-2, Vol. 2, pp. 130–146). Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Pinto, P. G. H. (2017). The Shattered Nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict. In N. Hashemi & D. Postel (Eds.), *Sectarianization* (pp. 123–142). Bell and Bain Ltd.
- Salamandra, C., & Stenberg, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Merchant Background, Bourgeois Ethics*. Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East (First edition., Vols. 1-2, Vol. 2). Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Wedeen, L. (1999). *Ambiguities of domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zartman, I. W. (2019). *I. William Zartman: A Pioneer in Conflict Management and Area Studies: Essays on Contention and Governance*. Springer International Publishing.

Online Sources

Ahmed, A. W. (2016, November 7). Deal for Four Cities... And Death From One Side. *The Syrian Observer*.

<https://syrianobserver.com/EN/commentary/24941/deal-four-cities-and-death-from-one-side.html>

Al-Tamimi, A. J. (2014, February 11). *The Assad Regime and Jihadis: Collaborators and Allies?* Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14413/the-assad-regime-and-jihadis-collaborators>

Alvarez-Ossorio, I. (2019). The Sectarian Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17(2), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1608644>

Angelova, I. (2014). *Governance in rebel-held East Ghouta in the Damascus Province, Syria* [Working Paper, Centre of Governance and Human Rights]. <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/246194>

Balanche, F. (2018, February). *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sectarianism-in-syrias-civil-war>

Batty, D., & Shenker, J. (2011, November 12). Syria suspended from Arab League. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/12/syria-suspended-arab-league>

BBC News. (2011, August 18). World leaders call on Assad to go. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14577333>

Büchs, A. (2009). *The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria Under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 1369189). Social Science Research Network. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1369189>

CIA. (2017, November 7). Syria Without Assad: Succession Politics. Cia.Gov. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80t00634a000400010052-5>

Cordall, S. S. (2014, June 21). *How Syria's Assad Helped Forge ISIS*. Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631>

Damascus suburb bomb: "This was a warning to religious minorities to take sides." (2012, November 28). The Observers. Retrieved July 24, 2019, from <https://observers.france24.com/en/20121128-bombs-damascus-suburb-jaramana-druze>

Darwisheh, H. (2013). *Deciphering Syria's Power Dynamics* (p. 25). Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organization. https://www.ide.go.jp/library/Japanese/Publish/Download/Seisaku/pdf/201307_mide_12.pdf

Ezzi, M. (2015). A Static Revolution: The Druze Community. In F. Stolleis (Ed.), *Playing the sectarian card: Identities and affiliations of local communities in Syria* (pp. 39–70). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>

Fahmi, J. (2018). The future of Syrian Christians after the Arab Spring. In S. Kawakibi (Ed.), *Politics of recognition and denial. Minorities in the MENA region*, EUROMESCO Joint Policy Study (pp. 48–67). European Institute of the Mediterranean. Retrieved from <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/politics-of-recognition-and-denial-minorities-in-the-mena-region/>

Gladstone, R., & Browne, M. (2019, December 4). In Syria, Health Workers Risk Becoming 'Enemies of the State.' *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/world/middleeast/syria-health-workers-persecution.html>

Goemans, H. E. (2008). Which Way Out?: The Manner and Consequences of Losing Office. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708323316>

- Goldman, Y. (2012, July 22). *Arab League calls on Assad to step down*. The Times of Israel. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-league-calls-on-assad-to-step-down/>
- Guliyev, F. (2011). Personal rule, neopatrimonialism, and regime typologies: Integrating Dahlian and Weberian approaches to regime studies. *Democratization*, 18(3), 575–601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.563115>
- Hegghammer, T., & Zelin, A. Y. (2013, July 7). *How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade>
- Heller, P. B. (1974). The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973. *Middle East Journal*, 28(1), 53–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4325185>
- Hinnebusch, R. (2019). Sectarianism and Governance in Syria. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19(1), 41–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12288>
- Hinnebusch, R., & Imady, O. (2017). Syria's Reconciliation Agreements. *Syria Studies*, 9(2), 1–14. <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1558>
- Holliday, J. (2013). *The Assad Regime From Counterinsurgency to civil war* (No. 8; Middle East Security Report). Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>
- Ismail, S. (2011). The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation: The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11(3), 538–549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01136.x>
- Josua, M., & Edel, M. (2015). To Repress or Not to Repress—Regime Survival Strategies in the Arab Spring. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(2), 289–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.806911>
- Khaddour, K. (2014, June 3). *Securing the Syrian Regime*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/55783>

Khaddour, K. (2015, August 7). *The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State*. Carnegie Middle East Center. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/07/08/assad-regime-s-hold-on-syrian-state-pub-60608>

Khaddour, K. (2016). Strength in weakness: The Syrian army's accidental resilience. *Carnegie Middle East Center*. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf

Khalaf, R. (2015). Governance Without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building During Conflict. *Syria Studies*, 7(3), 37–72. <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1176>

Koblentz, G. D. (2013). Regime Security: A New Theory for Understanding the Proliferation of Chemical and Biological Weapons. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 34(3), 501–525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2013.842298>

Lawley, C. (2019). *No School To Go Back To: The Impact of Airstrikes on Syria's Schools - Syrian Arab Republic*. Syria Relief. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-school-go-back-impact-airstrikes-syrias-schools>

Leenders, R., & Giustozzi, A. (2019). Outsourcing state violence: The National Defence Force, 'stateness' and regime resilience in the Syrian war. *Mediterranean Politics*, 24(2), 157–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1385169>

Lund, A. (2015, February 3). *Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?* Carnegie Middle East Center. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>

Lund, A. (2018, February 23). *Understanding Eastern Ghouta in Syria*. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/02/23/understanding-eastern-ghouta-syria>

Martínez, J. C., & Eng, B. (2018). Stifling stateness: The Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance. *Security Dialogue*, 49(4), 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010618768622>

Matar, D. (2019). The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 2398–2416. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31108/>

Nakkash, A. (2013). *The Alawite dilemma in Homs: Survival, solidarity and the making of a community*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf>

Narbone, L., Favier, A., Collombier, V., & Aldarwish, D. (Eds.). (2016). Local Governance under the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava. *Inside wars: Local dynamics of conflicts in Syria and Libya* (pp. 16–21). the European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Middle East Directions. Retrieved February 1, 2020, from <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/41644>

Perthes, V. (2000). Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security, and War Preparation in Syria. In S. Heydemann (Ed.), *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Retrieved from <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6c6006x6&chunk.id=ch5&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ch5&brand=ucpress>

Physicians for Human Rights. (2019, August 14). Killings of Syrian Health Workers Underscore Assad's Contempt for International Law: PHR. *Physicians for Human Rights*. <https://phr.org/news/killings-of-syrian-health-workers-underscore-assads-contempt-for-international-law-phr/>

Rathmell, A. (1996). Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development. *Journal of Conflict Studies*. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/11815>

Sabbagh, R. (2015). Attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Capital. In F. Stolleis (Ed.), *Playing the sectarian card: Identities and affiliations of local communities in Syria* (pp. 71–89). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>

Salaymeh, B. (2018). *Impact of neopatrimonialism on the trajectory of the conflict in Syria*.

https://www.academia.edu/37562694/IMPACT_OF_NEOPATRIMONIALISM_ON_THE_TRAJECTORY_OF_THE_CONFLICT_IN_SYRIA

Selvik, K. (2014). *Roots of fragmentation: The army and regime survival in Syria*. CMI - Chr. Michelsen Institute. Retrieved September 21, 2019, from <https://www.cmi.no/publications/5127-roots-of-fragmentation>

Soest, C. von, & Grauvogel, J. (2017). Identity, procedures and performance: How authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule. *Contemporary Politics*, 23(3), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319>

Sosnowski, M. (2019). Reconciliation agreements as strangle contracts: Ramifications for property and citizenship rights in the Syrian civil war. *Peacebuilding*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1646693>

Sottimano, A. (2016). Building authoritarian ‘legitimacy’: Domestic compliance and international standing of Bashar al-Asad’s Syria. *Global Discourse*, 6(3), 450–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2016.1152790>

Stolleis, F. (Ed.). (2015). *Playing the sectarian card: Identities and affiliations of local communities in Syria*. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>

Suter, M. (2017, September 12). Running out of water: Conflict and water scarcity in Yemen and Syria. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/running-out-of-water-conflict-and-water-scarcity-in-yemen-and-syria/>

Syria Country Report. (2018). *BTI - Transformation Index*. Retrieved February 16, 2019, from <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/SYR/>

Syrian foreign minister: “Fighting IS not our prime concern.” (2013, September 1). *The New Arab*. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/9/1/syrian-foreign-minister-fighting-is-not-our-prime-concern>

Tasopoulos, I. (2014). Religious Minorities in Turbulent Periods: The Recurring Dilemmas for Christians in Syria. *Hemispheres. Studies on Cultures and Societies*, 29(3). <http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-30ae95b9-8e94-4569-9393-e6e0ae50ce55>

The Damascus Spring. (2012, April 1). Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved October 18, 2019, from <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en>

Todman, W. (2016). *Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery* (Policy Focus Series). Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sieges-syria-profiteering-misery>

Wall Street Journal. (2011, January 31). Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>

Walt, S. M. (2019, October 17). Assad Is Now Syria's Best-Case Scenario. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/17/assad-syria-turkey-kurds-leadership/>

Ward, A. A. (2017). *Assad Regime Resilience During the Syrian Civil War: An Historical Perspective*. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies. <https://harmoon.org/assad-regime-resilience-syrian-civil-war-historical-perspective/>

Yazigi, J. (2016). Syria's Implosion: Political and Economic Impacts. In L. Narbone, A. Favier, & V. Collombier (Eds.), *Inside wars: Local dynamics of conflicts in Syria and Libya* (pp. 1–5). Retrieved February 1, 2020, from <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/41644>

Zambelis, C. (2015). Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience. *CTC Sentinel*, 8(5), 5–9. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2015/05/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue52.pdf>