

# Revolts in Syria

Saturday 14 September 2013, by [DAHI Omar S.](#), [MUNIF Yasser](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2011).

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With the popular revolt in Syria entering its sixth month, it is becoming more evident that the current regime in Damascus is in its final stages. While the regime continues to cling to power and brutally suppress the protest movement, it is also mobilizing two of its main credentials: an anti-imperialist ideology and its socialist-welfare state economic model.

Syria's political leadership has placed a premium on autonomy from opposition forces within and outside the country. Unlike other developing countries who went through shock therapy, economic liberalization in Syria was gradual and went through three distinct phases during Hafiz al-Assad's rule, while a fourth was inaugurated by Bashar al-Assad when he came to power. These processes unraveled the model of political consolidation built by the Ba'ath Party and refined by Assad. What they highlight is that, while there was an organic relationship between the emergence of a free market economy and coercive rule, the neoliberal authoritarian model also created the possibility for social revolt.

Since the Ba'ath coup in 1963, the emergent Pan-Arab Party developed a brand of socialism inspired by Gamal Abdel Nasser's economic planning and wealth distribution. The Pan-Arab Party was influential among schoolteachers and intellectuals until it merged with the Arab Socialist Party of Akram al-Hawrani in 1952. Hawrani had been an effective organizer and anti-feudal agitator among the peasantry. With the merger, the Ba'ath Party acquired a significant peasant base. When the Ba'ath seized power, a main concern was to improve the lives of workers and peasants and to undermine the hegemony of the Sunni landlord-merchant elite, which previously had controlled the state and most of the economy. One-third of agricultural land was redistributed to landless farmers and the banking sector and major industries were nationalized while foreign trade was monopolized by the state. To implement its program, the Party used force to repress any organized opposition. Early on, Minister of Defense Hafiz al-Assad eliminated his rivals both outside and within the Party. The political debates between the different factions were finally "resolved" through a bloodless coup led by Assad in 1970. This emergence of conservative factions inaugurated "a new era.

Once in power, Assad initiated a "liberal program to undo or halt the progressive measures that the "radical" faction of the Baath, led by Salah Jadid, had implemented in the previous few years, in particular on issues such as land reform, as well as curbs on the private merchant sector. On the surface, the developmental model pursued by the regime was that of import substitution industrialization whereby the state seized the commanding heights of the economy, launched infrastructure projects and industrial factories, and imposed quantitative restrictions on international trade. At the same time, the Syrian bureaucracy incorporated a large sector of the population under direct control of the state.

Since urban workers and peasants formed two important social bases for the regime, the state-led developmental program was meant to protect them from the market, rather than subject them to its

discipline. This meant that, while the regime was able to launch significant industrial and manufacturing projects, it was not able to make them a source of capital accumulation and the state remained distributive in nature, relying on oil revenues, aid, and remittances. Lack of viable manufacturing and industrial sectors signified that most of non-oil trade remained agricultural. In other words, the regime used its oil revenues to maintain social programs, such as free education, subsidized products, and free healthcare. To borrow from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the regime used the “left hand” of the state, which consisted of various welfare programs, to elevate the living conditions of the population. However, as Bourdieu explains, the state’s main goal was to maintain its power, regardless of whether this was achieved through consensus or violence. This is why, when it faced a crisis, the state governed through its “right hand,” by deploying coercion and violence to squash protests and social movements that contest its legitimacy. Peasants, workers, and professional syndicates (such as lawyers unions), while given official representation in the regime, gradually lost all autonomy. Increasingly, the leadership was appointed from above, rather than elected, and was strictly based on loyalty considerations.

To consolidate his power, Assad increasingly relied on the military and the secret police, in addition to creating a praetorian guard led by his brother Rifat. Under Assad’s rule, there were no Syrian citizens, only Syrian subjects. The result of his strategy was increased isolation of the ruling oligarchy and increased social alienation and potential opposition to the state. Lisa Wedeen has also argued that the regime’s “cult of Assad,” developed in the 1970s by then Minister of Information Ahmed Iskandar Ahmad, utilized a mixture of spectacle, rhetoric, and rituals that deified Assad, thereby ensuring obedience. Though no one truly believed in the cult of Assad, Wedeen argues, the regime’s ability to force people into acting as if they did produced an aura of total power and invincibility. It also had the effect of de-politicizing the population and even implicating them in the regime’s actions, though it is so exaggerated that it routinely invites transgressions, which subvert the cult itself.

Assad faced the first serious challenge to his rule in 1976. The regime failed to prevent a long stagnation of the living standards for many Syrians. In addition, it was unwilling to open a more inclusive political sphere. The result was the radicalization of the leftist opposition, particularly the Syrian new left embodied in the League of Communist Action and the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to the state of emergency—in place since 1963—the state waged a brutal war against any form of political organizing and citizens’ most basic rights were violated. The clash between the state and social movements (unions, Muslim Brotherhood, leftist parties) took various forms, ranging from independent organizing within unions to assassination and armed clashes with the police in Hamah and Damascus.

The crisis was also socio-economic since the policies implemented by the ruling oligarchy led to the gradual concentration of wealth and land in the hands of the old landlords and the new emerging bourgeoisie. The process of capital accumulation outside urban areas was profitable to the wealthy landlords who dispossessed a majority of the peasants and left them landless. In the city, living standards of the middle class declined while the margin for political activity withered away. Filling Syrian jails with tens of thousands of political prisoners and routinely torturing them proved to be insufficient. To end the political crises and prevent the Muslim Brotherhood’s uprising from achieving its aims, the regime, through its “right hand,” unleashed its repressive apparatus on the population. The 1982 massacres left between 10,000-20,000 dead.

The economic policy of the Assad regime led to a second crisis in the mid-1980s. To solve it, a faction of the ruling class considered the help of the World Bank and the IMF. However, the Syrian elite was reluctant to accept international dictates. Rather than bring in the World Bank, the situation was handled domestically. Under the influence of an increasingly powerful business community, the regime chose to “liberalize” the economy further. Following a severe foreign

exchange crisis in 1986, the state passed policies that allowed the private sector to invest more freely, increased the number of sectors open to the private, liberalized prices and reduced subsidies, and liberalized trade and exchange rates. The General Federation of Workers Syndicates prepared its own report in response to the crisis, calling for more government control over the economy and blamed the crisis on Syria's dependent position in the global economy and the rise of non-productive sectors. The fact that the Syndicates' proposals were marginalized shows the steady decline in the influence of one of the social bases of the regime—a trend that continued in the coming decade.

It is this context that opened the way for the passage of Investment Law No. 10 of 1991, which exempted new investments from taxes for several years. Multiple factors led to further liberalization in the 1990s when the private sector became a serious competitor to the public one. Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was understood as the demise of socialist ideology. Residual marxist discourse was dropped from the regime's literature and university curricula. More generally, the Syrian economy became more intertwined with global capitalism. The capitalist class, who was dependent on global finance, became stronger than local entrepreneurs. The conditions of state employees deteriorated rapidly, as the private sector emerged as the winner of neoliberalization. The contradictions at the leadership level were becoming acute. The Ba'ath Party as a locus of decision-making and deliberation gave way to the influence of prominent businesspeople.

Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power came with the promise of political and economic reform. After a brief flirtation with the former only the latter was implemented. The Damascus Spring led to a proliferation of independent periodicals, intellectual forums, and civil society organizations, culminating in various statements and manifestos (such as "Statement of 99") which demanded more freedom of expression and the abolition of special courts, martial law, and emergency legislation. Most of the civil society demands were measured and calculated—none demanded the fall of the regime or a radical political transformation. The government clamped down anyway and the "Spring" soon turned to "Winter" with Bashar Al-Assad's famous interview with Al-Sharq al-Awsat in February 2001, signaling a shift in government discourse: "When the consequences of an action affect the stability of the homeland, there are two possibilities.... Either the perpetrator is a foreign agent acting on behalf of an outside power or else he is a simple person acting unintentionally. But in both cases a service is being done to the country's enemies and consequently both are dealt with in a similar fashion, irrespective of their intentions or motives" (quoted in *The New Lion Of Damascus: Bashar Al-Assad And Modern Syria* by David Lesch, Yale University Press Lesch, 2005).

The regime's message was spread throughout the country by Khaddam—then vice-president—who later defected and now poses as a democratic reformer. Khaddam repeated the line that liberal intellectuals were tied to foreign agencies or embassies and were going to lead to the destruction of the country. It is worth recalling that most of the political activism during the "Damascus Spring" was centered around print media, public forums, and official statements—there was no one in the streets.

After Bashar al-Assad's accession to power in 2000, the state's reliance on the private sector grew substantially, although the difference was qualitative rather than quantitative. Previously, economic liberalization was done piecemeal and gradual, largely in response to crises. Under al-Assad there was a decisive turn towards the market economy. The economic leadership under Assad decided, perhaps with good reason, that the old model was unsustainable. But discarding the model completely represented a dilemma: could the regime afford to abandon its key constituents, namely the urban workforce and peasantry? The leadership debated whether aggressive neoliberalization or gradual liberalization should be adopted. The so-called "Chinese model" became a mantra of Syrian officials. Over the past decade the government dramatically liberalized trade (e.g. Legislative Decree 61 in 2009), including ending government monopolies of imports and liberalizing agricultural

exports through lowered export duties.

Domestically, this also meant liberalizing prices for most commodities (through the “Competition and Anti-Monopoly Law” of 2008). Private banks were licensed for the first time and a stock exchange was established. De-regulation of the real estate market, including reversal of decade-old tenant laws that would allow landlords to more easily evict tenants in previously rent-controlled housing (Tenants and Real Estate Law No. 6). Laws protecting private property were strengthened. Due to a decrease in oil revenues, which were cut almost in half in 15 years, structural adjustment was finally implemented, further marginalizing the public sector while giving the private sector a leading role.

## **Fundamental Changes**

These steps represented a fundamental change in the economic direction, signaled by major policy documents. In June 2005 during the Tenth Regional Congress of the Ba’ath Party, the term “social market economy” was introduced as the new economic model for Syria. Though the word “social” was used, presumably, to signal that aspects of the welfare state would remain, the policy implementation was more “market” than “social.” What emerged was an increasingly predatory neoliberal economy with a focus on consumption and unproductive investments. The replacement of Tayseer Al-Radawi, a leftist, with Abdallah al-Dardari, an economic liberal, as the head of the Planning Commission after the former had voiced concerns about rising inequality was another gesture of this shift.

The rise of this authoritarian neoliberalism is best symbolized by the role of Bashar el-Assad’s cousin, Rami Makhoul. When the invisible hand of the market didn’t suit him, he used coercion to achieve his goals. For example, when political dissident and parliament member Riad Seif questioned a cell phone company deal in which Makhoul was involved, Seif was put in jail. In the meantime, Makhoul’s economic empire grew to exceed \$3 billion in less than a decade. One of the sectors he had almost a monopoly over is wireless telephony. It’s interesting to note that this signals an expanded strategic sector for the collection of information and the surveillance of the population. Makhoul’s and others’ neoliberal practices devastated Syrian citizens’ standard of living. The concentration of wealth since the time of the UAR, has never been as uneven as when 5 percent of the population owns 50 percent of the wealth, leaving more than 30 percent unemployed and between 11 and 30 percent living under the poverty line.

In the past, the ruling class asked, “What does it cost to maintain power?” The answer was decisive in determining political alliances and the distribution of power between various social groups, the Party, the bureaucratic apparatus, and the ruling oligarchy. More recently, the ruling oligarchy stopped building coalitions. The military junta became the new bourgeoisie. The generals substituted their khaki uniforms and military hats for black suits and ties. A few weeks after Bashar al-Assad seized power in 2000, the young president ordered the removal of a huge picture of his father from one of the main squares of Damascus and it was replaced by a Lipton Tea advertisement of the same size. Perhaps the young dictator was convinced that the invisible hand of the market would make dissent disappear without appearing authoritarian.

The regime also decided to play the economic growth card, aided and abetted by former World Bank officials pushing the utopian powers of the market. The merger had a price, though, as the ruling class couldn’t create and undo alliances as it used to and the regime’s margin for political maneuvering became limited. The conflation of the ruling classes in the political and economic spheres reduced the field of political possibilities. The crumbling of the current regime should

therefore be seen in the context of this long history of the convergence between neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

## **Decolonial Arab Revolution**

The current crisis also has a geohistorical dimension. The power of Arab dictators is being contested because the system of independent nations, which emerged after decolonization, has reached its limits and is currently fissuring. A few decades ago, British and French colonialisms were replaced by military juntas and autocratic rulers who, for the most part, were closely allied to the West. In other words, rulers established neocolonial regimes to replace old-fashioned colonialism. During the colonial era, Western governments externalized some of the political and economic violence by exporting it to societies located in the periphery. Building liberal democracies in the West has been possible only because the surplus of violence was exported to the margins. Arab societies were at the receiving end.

The current Arab revolts should be understood as contesting not only Arab authoritarianism, but also dependence on the west. The cost of western neocolonialism combined with local authoritarianism is too high to be sustained. The struggles of Arab populations and their fight against imperialism have shown that at least some of the violence was non-exportable. In some cases, Arab populations tried to challenge authoritarianism by embracing what Fanon qualified as the colonial “program of complete disorder” and “absolute violence,” but for the most part they failed to overthrow the regimes, as the massacre in Hamah can attest. It’s crucial to situate the mostly peaceful revolts in today’s Arab world within such a context. Realizing that violence against dictatorship is bound to fail, Arab demonstrators have chosen to use the weapons of the weak: peaceful demonstrations. In doing so, Arab populations are leading a dual struggle: (1) they are battling Arab authoritarianism; (2) and they are attempting to contest global neoliberalism. This is why American and European governments have been reluctant to support the demands of Arab societies. The West interferes only to contain these revolts, either by militarizing them or by making deals with the most regressive groups willing to advance the American and European agendas. What is being challenged, therefore, is the unwritten social contract between the West and authoritarian rulers. The latter have accepted importing a portion of Western violence; in exchange, the “international community” would tolerate their autocratic rule.

Within the context of Arab authoritarianism, Syria has a unique trajectory. It doesn’t follow the diktats of the west in the same way Mubarak’s Egypt or Abdullah’s Jordan do, but it has never been truly oppositional to the U.S. world order, as it sometimes likes to portray itself. It has been more independent than the U.S. would like and, in an era of total subservience by Syria’s Arab brethren, this has seemed radical. But the main goal for this independence was regime preservation. Its 1976 involvement in the Lebanese war alongside right-wing Christian militias to crush the Palestinian Liberation Organization attests to the Syrian regime’s conservative nature. In 1991, Hafiz al-Assad chose to participate in the Gulf War against Iraq while his son’s regime participated in extraordinary rendition, torturing Syrian citizens to gather crucial information that could help the U.S. in its “global war on terror.” The timid response of the EU, the U.S., and the general silence by Israel shows that the West considers the Syrian regime a precious asset that can assist in maintaining the current hegemonic structure of power in the region, though their preference may be for it to be weakened and thus more subservient.

However, because of its seemingly oppositional foreign policy, the Syrian regime has had more legitimacy in the eyes of certain Arab populations—until the Syrian revolt. Its close relationship with the Iranian regime, as well as the Lebanese and Palestinian movements of resistance, made it unique

in the Arab context. The regime thought this strategic relationship would make it immune to the wave of protests in the Arab world. Bashar el-Assad made it clear five months ago that Syria was stable and would not be affected by the turbulence.

## **Syria's Revolt**

What will it cost to maintain power now? Authoritarian neoliberalism is rapidly losing its grip over society as well as its remaining legitimacy. An increasing number of Syrians are opposed to its rule even if, up until now, only a minority has demonstrated in the big cities. So far, the regime has been able to convince a sizable number of Syrians that the alternatives to its rule are dangerous sectarianism or dreadful extremism. The violence and killing of peaceful demonstrators that has taken place for more than three months is slowly changing the minds of Syrians. More and more citizens are calling for the downfall of the regime and are persuaded it must go after the many crimes it has committed. The chances of the regime building a viable alliance are almost nil. The polarization between the regime and the rest of the population is preventing the creation of a new historic bloc on which the regime could build its future. The arrest of every man and boy below the age of 40 in Daraa demonstrates the weakness of a destabilized regime and is very reminiscent of the colonial era. The checking of every computer and Facebook account of males who enter the country demonstrates the regime's growing desperation.

What the Syrian and Arab regimes fail to understand is that once minds are decolonized, it is extremely difficult to re-colonize them. The decolonization of the mind is irritating Arab dictators who have spent several decades trying to "domesticate" their populations. More importantly, Arab regimes fail to understand that even if they can evade their downfall today, they're only postponing their ultimate demise.

The Syrian revolt not only contains a rejection of the ruling elite, but has already advanced beyond traditional dissidence. The people in the streets are creating a new reality far ahead of the rest of the population. Meanwhile, the internalization of the repression has been deeply ingrained into the minds of many Syrians. This, coupled with the systematic dismantling and destruction of civil society, led to the inability to have meaningful discussions on the country's economy, human development, and democracy. It also helped create the impression of a lack of alternative. No matter how imaginary this actual lack may be, many Syrians felt alienated and fearful of each other, seemingly caught off guard by the extent of the suffering of so many fellow citizens. Unable to comprehend how people could quite possibly march to a certain death, many have gladly taken refuge in lies and conspiracy theories, as well as in hatred and anger at the protesters.

The Syrian media has resorted to the most despicable incitement against the protesters. In addition to creating the specter of sectarianism when there was no evidence that it existed, the regime and media wanted to make the population accomplices in the massacres committed or about to be committed. Caller after caller to Syrian State TV talk shows announced, to the delight and encouragement of the hosts, their desire to see the regime hit out with an iron fist against the "saboteurs" and "conspirators."

The response of the regime has been a mixture of obviously unsustainable economic giveaways with more sinister social policies and sheer violence and brutality. For example, on March 24, about 2 million civil servants and pensioners had their pay increased between 20 and 30 percent, coupled with a general reduction in income taxes. The loss of revenue due to lower tariff and tax rates (cut to lower the price of foodstuffs and basic consumption goods), the costs of the pay raise, along with the Social Fund that was announced recently to aid disadvantaged families, will probably exceed \$1

billion or roughly 6 percent of the Syrian governments entire budget. Clearly this pay raise was a form of bribery to stop the ongoing protests. The apotheosis of authoritarian rule and neoliberal policies is best exemplified by the eagerness of top businesspeople, such as Rami Makhlouf, Ayman Al-Jaber, Khaled Abboud, and Ahmad Anas al-Shami to turn their warehouses into detention centers for the regime to use once its gigantic prisons were already filled.

Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, Syria's army, security apparatus, and government are loyal to the ruling class. This makes their removal more complicated than in the other cases. However, the rising number of independent institutions may suggest a chance for consensus and participatory institutional building. Moreover, the relatively young population is a gift and not a curse. It means ideologies and world views can be shaped in a positive direction through democratic practice and open discourse, rather than continuing to ossify and harden under autocratic rule. Time is running out, however, and the question of what it costs to maintain power is yet to be answered.

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**P.S.**

\* Z Magazine, November 2011, Volume 24, Number 11:

<http://www.zcommunications.org/revolts-in-syria-by-omar-s-dahl.html>

\* Omar S. Dahi is assistant professor of economics at Hampshire College. Yasser Munif is an activist and assistant professor at Emerson College. They would like to thank Sayres Rudy and Frank Holmquist for comments on previous drafts of this article. Photo credits: Syria's Assads. Photo from Stop the War Coalition, Sydney, Australia. Pro-democracy protest, March 2011. Photo from [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk). King Abdullah of Saudia Arabia hosts Syrian President Basher al-Assad, March 2009. Photo from Reuters/Fahad Shadeed.