

Summer 7-14-2016

# The Survival of Authoritarianism and Syrian Identity Crisis: Explaining the Resilience of Assad's Ruling Bargain

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## Recommended Citation

Vasquez, Joshua, "The Survival of Authoritarianism and Syrian Identity Crisis: Explaining the Resilience of Assad's Ruling Bargain" (2016). *PPPA Paper Prize*. 8.

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The Survival of Authoritarianism and  
The Syrian Identity Crisis: Explaining the Resilience of Assad's Ruling Bargain

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TPOLS 480 Democratization and Political Development in the Middle East  
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7/14/16

## Introduction

The Arab Spring was a remarkable event that occurred in 2011, which forever altered the political and social structure of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It was a regional social mobilization where citizens took to the streets and confronted their corrupt, oppressive and distant dictators. The citizens of the region demanded the end of corruption, democratic elections and human rights. Instead of heeding to their citizens demands, the various dictators of the region attempted to restore order through coercion. However, this strategy backfired by increasing the revolutionary zeal of the people, which unraveled ‘ruling bargains’ in the Middle East, which have been resilient since the early 1950s. Before discussing anything further about the Arab Spring, it is important to define the term ruling bargain. According to Mehran Kamrava, “ruling bargains are corporatist arrangements in the national political economy whereby the state brings into its orbit, and politically pacifies, strategic social actors such as the civil service, entrepreneurs and the broader middle classes.”<sup>1</sup> Simplicity, a ruling bargain is a contract where the state promises to provide public services in exchange for political legitimacy from the society.

However, overtime the state proved to be insufficient to provide such services, where it became dependent on cooptation, legitimacy, external actors and repression to preserve the status quo. However, in 2011, the ruling bargains in the region unraveled where in Tunisia Ben Ali was ousted in three weeks and fled to Saudi Arabia. After two weeks of demonstrations in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak resigned from the presidency because the Egyptian Armed Forces defected to the opposition. In Libya, Muammar Qaddafi was ousted in an eight month civil war supported by

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<sup>1</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East,” in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

NATO intervention, which resulted in his demise. Lastly, in Yemen Abdullah Saleh resigned from mounting domestic and international pressure. Despite the successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, some ruling-bargains have survived to today, such as in Syria.

In the beginning of the Syrian uprising, it appeared Assad's ruling bargain was unraveling and it was only a matter of time before he met a similar fate like other regional dictators. However, the revolution where Syrians sought bring democracy gradually morphed into a sectarian struggle that divided the country among sectarian and socioeconomic lines. Therefore my research question is how does identity politics explain the resilience of Assad's ruling bargain? This question is important because it will explain how authoritarian regimes survive and how identity politics hinder the perquisite for democratization, the need for national unity. This research will also help U.S. policymakers by showing them the concerns of minorities if Assad falls. Minorities are convinced there is no future for them in a post-Assad Syria, so they support the regime largely out of fear of the alternative. Guaranteeing these communities a future will bring down Assad and may bring democratization.

This paper will first explain what authoritarianism is and explore factors that contribute to the survival and consolidation of authoritarianism, such as cooptation, legitimacy, external factors and repression. An analysis will also be provided to explain how Assad has manipulated Syria's heterogeneous nature to ensure his survival by demonstrating how Alawites, Christians, Druze and Urban Sunnis have benefited from his ruling bargain. Information will be gathered to demonstrate how minorities have propped up Assad by forming paramilitaries and how the ruling elite have remain loyal in a time of crisis. Since the revolution began, defections have plagued the regime. However, defections primarily occur within the lower positions of power, which are dominantly Sunni while Alawites control the upper echelons of power. Yet, these

defections created a shortage of man power to confront the opposition on multiple war fronts across the country.

The formation of the National Defense Force (NDF) has bolstered Assad's forces, but the sectarian disposition of the NDF generated a sectarian narrative to the country's civil war because its ranks consists majority of Alawites, who have massacred Sunnis in opposition held territories. This provides jihadist organizations like Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to thrive and justify the massacring of minorities to protect Sunni communities. Therefore, the sectarian composition of the civil war has made minorities dependent on the regime for protection because of the fear of retaliatory attacks by jihadists. Despite the opposition consists primarily of Sunnis, the regime retains support from Urban Sunni communities, who have benefited economically from Assad's economic liberalization policies in the early 2000s. Lastly, Assad retains support from critical institutions, such as the military from military units like the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division. This results from the fact that the upper elchons of power are occupied with Assad's minorities and relatives/. From this Assad created a ruling coalition or a 'State Bourgeoisie', which has been loyal through years of conflict. Therefore, my thesis is the cooptation of minorities and relatives into the ruling bargain has enabled Assad to survive six years of conflict.

### **Explaining the Survival of Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism is a system of government that consists of a strong central authority and political pluralism is restricted or nonexistent. In authoritarianism, society is govern by an individual with absolute power, or a bureaucracy where power is distributed within it. In most authoritarian systems, the bureaucracy consists of one percent of a country's population. The bureaucracy incorporate various aspects of society, such as institutions which support the regime

in return for privileges of power, wealth and security in exchange for support. An illustration is when “that under authoritarianism, the church or military are pulled into an active political stance in support of the regime (in the case of the military), or opposition to it (as with the church).”<sup>2</sup> Both the church and military are examples of institutions that can be absorbed into the bureaucracy.

Under authoritarian rule, the one percent has a monopoly of power while the majority is largely excluded from governance. An example of an authoritarian system is the Assad regime in Syria. The Assad family has ruled Syria for the past forty-five years to the extent that Hafiz Al-Assad and his successor Bashar Al-Assad have monopolized power by placing loyal relatives and friends in the upper echelons of power. Consequently, this excluded the majority of Syrians from having a role in governing their country. The purpose of this strategy is to ensure regime survival and maintain the status quo.

However, one of the main drawbacks of authoritarianism is that it can be unstable. According to Gretchen Casper, “instability could generate from the erosion of the regime’s legitimacy, defections of key members of the regime’s support coalition, conflict within the ruling block itself, or the emergence of a credible alternative leader.”<sup>3</sup> The instability of authoritarian systems could cause the state to collapse and send a country into political upheaval. Within the forty-five years that the Assad family has ruled Syria, the regime experienced three events which threaten to unravel it. From 1976 to 1982, there was an Islamist insurgency led by the armed wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood called ‘The Fighting Vanguard’, which almost pushed the country to the brink of civil war. In 1983, there was an attempted coup by

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<sup>2</sup> Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

Hafiz Al-Assad's brother Rif'at when Assad was incapacitated due to illness. Lastly, there is the current civil war that has pushed the regime to its limits. Despite the challenges Assad and many other autocrats encounter, many of them have been able to survive for long periods of time. To understand this phenomenon, scholars have developed four theories to explain the resilience of authoritarianism, which include cooptation, legitimacy, external factors and repression. The next section will present scholarly work from various scholars on which one of these four present the best explanation of the survival of authoritarianism and my analysis on their research.

### **Cooptation**

The first theory presented to explain the survival of authoritarianism consists of cooptation. Cooptation is when an autocrat incorporate components of civil society into the regime by guaranteeing privileges in exchange for political support. Authoritarian regimes often lack legitimacy to the extent "autocrats face two types of threats to their rule: those that emerge from within the ruling elite and those that come from outsiders within society."<sup>4</sup> The most common threat derives from within the regime itself.

To neutralize threats, autocrats co-opt forces that pose a threat, such as institutions and aspects of civil society. This is demonstrated when Beatriz Magaloni states, "dictators can minimize the risks of being overthrown when they are able to co-opt potential rivals by offering credible power-sharing deals that guarantee a share of power over the long run."<sup>5</sup> Power is shared among different aspects of society that create a ruling coalition, which entrenches the authoritarian structure. However, a persistent threat to the ruling coalition is factionalism. Aspects of the ruling elite may try to increase their power at the expense of others. An

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Politics Studies* 40 11 (2007): 1280.

<sup>5</sup> Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule Power," *Comparative Politics Studies* 41 4/5 (2008): 738.

illustration is “when the members of the ruling coalition suspect that the dictator is making steps towards strengthening his position at their expense, they may stage a coup in order to stop him.”<sup>6</sup> This creates factions who compete for power, which will gradually unravel the state. At this point various factions will rely on cooptation, legitimacy, external actors and repression to obtain power.

In Syria, the Ba’athist regime was in jeopardy in the late 1960s because tensions broke out between two prominent regime figures named Hafiz Al-Assad and Saleh Jadid, which fragmented the regime between two camps. The inter-factional fighting resulted “from who was to blame for the Arabs’ military defeat against Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967 and because of differences of opinion over military, foreign and socioeconomic policies.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Assad ousted Jadid in a coup in 1970 that Assad called the “Corrective Movement”. Once Assad came to power, he brought an end to Syria’s instability by purging his enemies and co-opting relatives, friends and religious minorities into his ruling bargain. In return for political support, these groups received security, power, and wealth. The cooptation of these groups has enabled the regime to survive because their interests are interwoven within the system. If the regime falls, they risk losing everything they gained and will become marginalized. By co-opting relatives and minorities, Hafiz Al-Assad created a power base amongst these groups, who legitimized his presidency. Legitimacy is the next school of thought that will be analyzed next.

### **Legitimacy**

Legitimacy is the second theory that explains the survival of authoritarianism. It involves the notion whether the populace accepts the regime. According to Paul Brooker, “one critical

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<sup>6</sup> Milan W. Svobik, “Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53 2 (2009): 481.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba’th Party* (New York: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2011), 62.

aspect for the consolidation of authoritarian rule involves seeking legitimacy.”<sup>8</sup> In democratic societies, the populace don’t question the legitimacy of their leaders because they gain their right to govern through elections, where the populace have the option to vote for a candidate to represent their country. Yet, in authoritarian rule, autocrats have to prove why the public should accept them. According to Paul Brooker, “the majority of authoritarian rulers justify their rule by playing on national interests or patriotic claims.” To legitimize their rule, autocrats often rely on nationalist sentiment to acquire support.

However, some autocrats have survived with minimal support. When a dictator’s legitimacy has been lost, they rely on repression or their foreign alliances to survive. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Assad regime justified its rule by having a foreign policy consistent with population views. The majority of Syrians are hostile towards Israel and the regime legitimized its rule by claiming it’s the only state willing to confront Israel and reclaiming the Golan Heights while others such as Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel. Despite the regime’s stance towards Israel, the majority of Syrians turned against it in March of 2011 when it attempted to use lethal force to quell peaceful demonstrations for change. However, it is important to note, that minorities still perceive the regime as legitimate because they have benefited from Assad for the past forty-five years and fear becoming marginalized if the regime falls.

It is also critical to note that the use of repression caused the regime to lose legitimacy internationally. Internationally, Assad has lost legitimacy to the extent that Syria’s membership to the Arab League was suspended in the fall of 2011. Yet, the regime has retained legitimacy from some regional and international powers, such as Iran, Hezbollah and Russia who have close

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 106

military and economic ties to Assad. Despite losing legitimacy from the majority of the world, Assad has survived by relying on his foreign allies for political, military and economic support and through the continued use of repression.

### **External Actors**

The role of external actors is the third explanation of the survival of authoritarianism. External factors includes the role of foreign entities in a country's domestic affairs. Scholar Nicole J. Jackson argues external actors are essential to the survival of authoritarianism that, "external actors influence authoritarian states to maintain the status quo and further entrench authoritarian rule."<sup>9</sup> External actors entrench authoritarian states because foreign entities aim to preserve their interests in other states. They also support authoritarian states because it's easier to maintain the status-quo, unlike democratic societies where change is frequent and unpredictable.

An illustration is the Russian and Syrian relationship, where Russia has politically, militarily and economically supported the Assad regime during Syria's civil war. According to Roy Allison, "Russia's intervention derives from the fact that Syria is the only ally Russia has in the region."<sup>10</sup> If Assad falls Russia could possibly lose its only ally, which will shrink Moscow's footprint in the region and shift international politics. Assad also receives support from Iran and Hezbollah who also support Assad politically, militarily and economically. Similar to Russia, Iran and Hezbollah support for geopolitical reasons. According to Erik Mohns and Andre Bank state, "the Assad regime is the only ally Iran and Hezbollah have in the region and Syria acts as a free passage for Iran to have a stake in the Arab-Israeli conflict by providing arms to

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<sup>9</sup> Nicole J. Jackson, "The Role of External Factors in Advancing Non-Liberal Democratic Forms of Political Rule: A Case Study of Russia's Influence on Central Asian Regimes," *Contemporary Politics* 16 1 (2010): 102.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89 4 (2013): 809

Hezbollah.”<sup>11</sup> The fall of Assad would dramatically affect Iran’s and Hezbollah’s influence in regional and international affairs. These geopolitical concerns are why Russia, Iran and Hezbollah have propped up Assad during the civil war. From these concerns they perceive Assad as legitimate because they would lose their political clout regionally and internationally if the regime falls. Therefore, they intervene in the conflict to preserve the status-quo.

Despite Assad’s foreign support, some regimes have survived with limited outside support. An example is North Korea where the Kim Jong Dynasty has ruled for the past seventy years. The regime follows a strict isolation policy where it has minimum contact with the outside. The country does have relations with other states like China, but overall North Korea has few allies. The regime relies on repression, legitimacy and cooptation to survive. The dependency on these methods have gradually turned North Korea into a totalitarian state, which is an extreme form of authoritarianism that relies largely on repression for survival.

### **Repression**

The last theory consists of repression. Repression is the state’s use of coercion to restrict or prevent civil society from governing the country. According to Christian Davenport, “state coercion has two basic components: violent repression that violates personal integrity and less violent (or nonviolent) activities that restrict civil liberties.”<sup>12</sup> Violent repression involves committing bodily harm to an individual or group, while nonviolent repression consists of threatening to inflict harm in an attempt to influence an individual’s or group’s thinking. Either way, both methods of repression are utilized by autocrats to uphold conformity.

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<sup>11</sup> Erik Mohns and Andre Bank, “Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?,” *Middle East Policy* 19 3 (2012): 29-31.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Davenport, “The Promise of Democratic Pacification: An Empirical Assessment,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48 3 (2004): 543.

However, does the use of repression maintain conformity and increase the likelihood of a dictator's survival? According to Abel Escriba-Folch, "his the results reveal that repression certainly increases the likelihood of dictators' survival."<sup>13</sup> Other scholars like Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman also assert that repression is an effective strategy. Although, they declare, "repression is used against citizens only as a last resort when the opportunities to survive through co-optation, censorship, and propaganda are exhausted."<sup>14</sup> Repression acts as the last option for a dictator's survival.

Repression can ensure the survival of a dictator by installing fear within the populace, but it can also backfire and generate resentment towards the state. For example, Ronald A. Francisco proclaims that consistent repression necessarily increases the amount of revolutionary zeal in a country."<sup>15</sup> Relying solely on repression for survival will backfire and lead to the collapse of an authoritarian system. In Syria, repression worked when Hafiz Al-Assad crushed the Islamist insurgency in Hama during 1982, which resulted in peace for the next 29 years. Yet, when Bashar Al-Assad followed his father's strategy during the Arab Spring, repression backfired by increasing the revolutionary zeal among the populace, sparked international condemnation and sent the country into a civil war.

Together cooptation, legitimacy, external factors and repression creates a paradigm which explains the preservation of authoritarianism. However, cooptation is the most essential aspect this paradigm. A deeper analysis of this paradigm and what makes cooptation the most essential aspect of this paradigm will be discuss in the next section of this paper.

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<sup>13</sup> Abel Escriba-Folch, "Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy," *International Political Science Review* 34 5 (2013): 543.

<sup>14</sup> Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *How Modern Dictators Survive: Cooptation, Censorship, Propaganda, and Repression* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2015), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco, Ronald A. "The Dictator's Dilemma." in *Repression and Mobilization*, edited by Christian Davenport, Hank Johnson, and Carol Mueller, 65 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

### **The Probable Explanation and the Authoritarian Paradigm**

Cooptation, Legitimacy, External Factors and Repression are explanations that explain the survival and consolidation of authoritarianism. All four are important for the preservation of authoritarianism, but cooptation is the most probable explanation to this phenomenon. When an autocrat assumes power, he needs to legitimize his rule by creating a support base. To create his base, he will co-opt aspects of civil society into the ruling bargain by promising privileges of power, wealth and security for support. Once aspects of civil society are absorbed into the ruling bargain, then his rule will be legitimized domestically. Also, he will rely on national sentiment and propaganda to further legitimize his rule. Despite this, it is important to note that authoritarianism is still an unstable system of governance. Therefore, an autocrat will seek legitimacy abroad by relinquishing some state-sovereignty for political, military and economic support. This will legitimize his rule amongst his allies because their interests in the country could be threatened if the regime is threatened. If the regime does face political upheaval, external factors may intervene to preserve their interests in the country.

Lastly, an autocrat will use repression to silence those who oppose the regime and will not be coopted into the ruling bargain. This includes the mass incarceration or the murdering of political opponents. Cooptation, Legitimacy, External Actors and Repression creates a paradigm to explain the survival and consolidation of authoritarianism. However, cooptation is the most essential aspect of this paradigm because every autocrat needs a support base to survive, which will legitimize their rule. External actors and repression are merely secondary mechanisms that an autocrat relies on if cooptation fails. The next portion of my research will focus on how the Assad regime in Syria coopted minorities into the ruling bargain by demonstrating how they benefit from the regime, their fears if Assad falls, the sectarian nature of the current conflict and

how they have propped up Assad during the conflict. This will show how Assad has survived years of conflict while others like Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Qaddafi have fallen within months. Also, the Syrian case will demonstrate how cooptation is the most essential element of the authoritarian paradigm.

### **The Alawites and Their Rise to Power**

To understand the sectarian nature of Syria's civil war, one must understand the country's heterogeneous nature and the struggle of the Alawites. Syria is one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East among sectarian lines that "Sunnis constitute 74 percent of the population, with Alawites at 12 percent, Christians at 10 percent, Druze at 3 percent and Jews other Muslim sects at 1 percent."<sup>16</sup> The Assad regime is characterized as minority rule because the Alawites dominate the state. However, the Alawites have not always had a monopoly of power. Prior to the Ba'athist Coup of 1963, Alawites were subjugated to Sunni domination to the extent that "the former were regarded as second-class citizens to where they had limited rights and acted as servants to Sunni leaders prior to Assad's rise to power."<sup>17</sup> The Alawites were subjugated to the extent that they were excluded from governing the country.

However, life changed for the Alawites following the Ba'athist Coup of 1963 because "the coup of March 8 sounded the death knell of Syria's *ancient regime* and the end of the domination of the country by Sunni notable families."<sup>18</sup> The Ba'athist's seizure of power changed Syria's political structure by placing minorities, such as Alawites, Christians and Druze into power who sought to promote Arab Nationalism and Socialism. However, it is important to note that the Alawites benefited the most from the coup because "they represented 90 percent of

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and David W. Lesch. "Syrian Arab Republic." In *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Mark Gasiorowski, 262. Boulder: Westview Press, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Jomana Qaddour, "Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria", *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 72.

<sup>18</sup> John McHugo, *Syria: A Recent History* (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 144.

officers in the Ba'athist Military Committee that governed the country.”<sup>19</sup> Since the coup, the Alawites way of life changed significantly to where “they were awarded scholarships and traveled abroad for higher degrees, becoming doctors, engineers, lawyers and university professors so that in the 1990s they were strongly represented in the professions and senior cadres of the state, rivalling and sometimes displacing the Sunni and Christian intelligentsia.”<sup>20</sup> Hafiz Al-Assad created a power base by placing his kin in critical positions of power. Assad's favoritism towards Alawites is demonstrated when “a Syrian ambassador who fled to Turkey told Hurriyet, ““There are 360 diplomats within the Syrian Foreign Ministry with 60 percent Alawites and less than 10 percent Sunni.””<sup>21</sup> The percentage difference between Alawites and Sunnis demonstrates that the ruling bargain is sectarian.

When the 2011 Syrian uprising began, it appeared the fall of Assad's ruling bargain was imminent. Bashar Al-Assad used repression like his father did in Hama in 1982 to crush an Islamist uprising, but this time repression failed. Instead it backfired against the regime by exacerbating the situation. Domestically, it increased the revolutionary zeal of the opposition, and severely undermined Assad's legitimacy to where he lost support from the majority of the Sunni periphery. Internationally, the use of lethal force sparked condemnation. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership, the country was hit with sanctions, world leaders called for Assad to step down and threatened military intervention based on the United Nation's Responsibility to Protect Doctrine.

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<sup>19</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'ath Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'ath Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Landis, “The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013”, *Middle East Policy* 19 1 (2012): 73.

Despite these setbacks, Assad has been able to survive by exploiting sectarianism. The regime demonizes the opposition as fundamentalists, which makes minorities reluctant to defect out of fear of retribution based on association. This strategy also makes the international community reluctant to oust Assad because fundamentalist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and the ISIS are the strongest elements of the opposition, whose aim is to overthrow the regime and establish an Islamic Caliphate. The sectarian overtone of the civil war has indoctrinated Alawites in believing they are nothing without the regime. The community fear retribution because some aspects of the opposition view them as apostates, they consider the Alawites guilty based on association, and messages have emerged within the opposition threatening Alawites. The growing hostility towards Alawites is demonstrated when, “images and videos emerging out of Syria since 2012, becoming increasingly violent and sectarian along the way, showcased extremist groups and even children chanting things like, ‘Assad we will bring you down, and then we will come next for the [Alawites]!’”<sup>22</sup>

The community also worries of becoming marginalized and subordinate to Sunni domination again. The fears of retribution and marginalization stem from observing the sectarianism that has unfolded in neighboring Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein by U.S. forces in 2003. In Iraq, Sunnis have become marginalized by the Shia government because the former have been deemed guilty based on association. In Syria, the indoctrination of the Alawite community created a support base for the regime. This has caused the community to remain loyal and report those who try to flee or sympathize with the opposition. In one incident, “A deserter who called his cousin, seeking help to escape Syria, was found dead the next morning, presumably because his own cousin had reported him.”<sup>23</sup> Assad’s exploitation of sectarianism

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<sup>22</sup> Jomana Qaddour, “Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria”, *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

has not only pitted communities against each other, but has turned family members against each other within these communities. Also, it important to note that Alawites are not the only ones who have benefited from the regime and express such fear if Assad falls. Christians have also benefit from the regime and express similar fears, which will be analyze in the next section.

### **The Corrosion of Christian Security**

Similar to Alawites, Christians were regarded as subordinates to Sunni Arabs prior to the Ba’athist Coup of 1963 to the extent that “many Sunni Arab nationalists tended to regard members of the Arabic speaking religious minorities as ‘imperfect Arabs’ because they were heterodox Muslims or not Muslims at all.”<sup>24</sup> This demonstrates that religious minorities prior to the Ba’athist coup were discriminated against by the Sunni majority. However, when the Ba’athists came to power in 1963 and when Hafiz Al-Assad ascended to the presidency in 1970, the Christian community’s fortunes changed. Since, they have prospered under the regime to the extent that “many Syrian Christians achieved higher incomes and educational levels than their Muslim counterparts, differences that persist today.”<sup>25</sup> Assad coopted the Christian community by improving their standard of living in exchange for support.

Also, Assad received support by portraying the regime as secular. During Hafiz-Al Assad’s presidency, he emphasized the need to do away with sectarianism and embrace the Syrian Ba’athist identity. He urged the public to abandon sectarianism by saying:

Islam is one thing and this gang is something else again. The Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party is a nationalist party that does not differentiate between religions. As a faithful Muslim, I encourage everyone to have faith and fight rigidity and fanaticism, because they contradict Islam. I believe that a true Muslim is the brother of his Muslim and Christian brothers, and that a true Christian is the

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<sup>24</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba’th Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 133.

brother of the Christian and Muslim. If Syria had not always been above sectarianism, it would not now exist.<sup>26</sup>

The regime's secularism provided a security blanket for Christians. However, since the civil war Christians no longer feel secure. In the beginning, hostilities were directed towards the regime and the Alawite community. As the conflict progress extremists groups like the ISIS took root in the country and aggression towards Christians began to emerge. An illustration is when "slogans such as 'Syria is the land of the Prophet!' or 'Syria is the land of jihad' filled the air and were directed towards Christians and other minorities."<sup>27</sup> These slogans have generated concerns within the Christian community.

Today, Christians no longer feel safe in their homeland. Violence has been inflicted upon the community. An example when Reese Enrich tells the story of Maryam in the city Qusayr, "where masked men entered their apartment one night with the intent to kidnap all the Christian men in Qusayr."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Christians in areas controlled by jihadist groups like ISIS have been told to either convert or die. As a result of the collapse of security within the country, many Christians have fled the country or moved into regime strongholds. The fear of jihadist groups has propelled Christians to rally around Assad, such as in the city of Saidnaya. Frederik Pleitgen reports in *Pro-Government Forces Find a Haven at Syria Town's Christian Monastery*, "Syrian Christian fighters have aided the Syrian Army in repelling the Jabhat Al-Nusra's advance towards Saidnaya."<sup>29</sup> The strength of the jihadists has created profound fear within the Christian community. Therefore, they are reluctant to abandon Assad because they fear extermination if

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<sup>26</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'th Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 95.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Mikhael, "The Syrian War and the Christians of the Middle East", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39 2 (2015): 70.

<sup>28</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 133.

<sup>29</sup> Frederik Pleitgen, "Pro-Government Forces Find A Haven At Syria Town's Christian Monastery", *CNN*, January 24, 2014, accessed July 2, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/24/world/meast/syria-christian-monastery/>

jihadists take control of the entire country. The growing strength of extremists groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS has propelled the Alawite and Christian communities to rally around Assad for security. However, some minorities have been reluctant to support a side in the conflict. An example is the Druze who have tried to maintain neutrality and will be discussed next.

### **The Druze: From Neutrality to Active Engagement**

Compared to Alawites and Christians, it is difficult to determine the Druze's political position in Syria because Firas Maksad states, "determining the loyalties of Syria's Druze has been difficult, as its members hide their political persuasions -- a preference for privacy with roots in their theological concept of *taqiyya*, the concealing of one's religious beliefs to avoid accusations of heresy."<sup>30</sup> The privacy of the community has created the perception that they tried to maintain a neutral stance in the conflict. However, as the conflict progresses, the stance of the community changes because "the killing of some of the sect's religious leaders by extremists have dragged the community into the conflict."<sup>31</sup> These killings have shattered the perception of neutrality and increase the community's role in the conflict.

Since becoming involved in the conflict, the community has been divided between supporting Assad or not. Similar to Christians, some Druze support the regime because of its secularist nature. An example is when a Druze named Akba Abu Shaheen tells Reese Erlich, "It's important for me not to live in a religious country, but in a secular country."<sup>32</sup> Like other minorities Druze are fearful of being targeted by fundamentalists because they are perceived as heretics. As a result, some Druze have taken up arms to defend their territory and formed militias

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<sup>30</sup> Firas Mksad, "The Druze Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2014, accessed July 6, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2014-10-08/druze-dilemma>

<sup>31</sup> Sarita Saad, "Lebanon Druze Wary of Being Dragged into Syria Conflict," *Al Monitor*, August 21, 2014, accessed July 6, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/08/syria-druze-under-attack-lebanon-potential-support.html>

<sup>32</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 194.

like the Jaysh Al-Muwahhideen, which mainly operates out of the Suwayda Province because it has the highest Druze population in the country.

However, some Druze have developed grievances towards Assad over the course of the conflict. These grievances stems from the fact that “Assad has not provided them with enough weapons to defend against attacks by ISIS and al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat Al-Nusra.”<sup>33</sup> The community has threatened to turn its back against the regime, acquire arms from other sources, and act independently if Assad is not willing to help. The loss of the Druze could be a critical blow to the regime because Firas Maksad proclaims, “For Assad, the Druze are a strategic buffer, defending the southern flank of Damascus from rebel-controlled territory farther south.”<sup>34</sup> The loss of the Druze could open a path to allow the opposition to march into Damascus.

The past couple of sections demonstrate how Assad co-opted Alawites, Christians and Druze into the ruling bargain by analyzing how they benefit from the regime and their fears if Assad falls. The growing sectarian narrative of the conflict has created a hostile environment for these communities where extremists groups like ISIS label them as apostates and call for their extermination. As a result, some minorities have fled the country while others have stayed and fought alongside the SAA by forming militias. The formation of these militias has provided Assad with additional forces to counter the opposition by centralizing them to create the National Defense Force (NDF), which will be discuss in the next section.

### **The Formation of the National Defense Force**

The concerns of religious minorities propelled these communities to form independent militias in the early phases of the conflict to protect their community and the Assad regime.

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<sup>33</sup> Firas Maksad, “The Druze Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2014, accessed July 6, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2014-10-08/druze-dilemma>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

However, “in mid-2012 Damascus made the decision to centralize these militias within a ‘National Defense Force’ (NDF) trained mainly by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force.”<sup>35</sup> The formation of the NDF has bolstered Assad’s forces and has been essential in Assad’s survival because the six year conflict has taken its toll on the SSA.

When the conflict began, the SAA suffered from structural damage because it fragmented along sectarian-lines. The majority of conscripts consisted of Sunnis while their officers tended to be Alawite. The former defected because they refused to fire upon their Sunni brethren. Therefore, this created a shortage of man power “that when the revolution began, the SAA composed of 220,000 soldiers, but two years later, due to possible unreliability and potential disloyalty of the Sunni dominant portions, the military was forced to rely upon an Alawite led core of roughly 65,000 personnel nationwide.”<sup>36</sup> This shortage has made it difficult for the SAA to sustain offensive operations against the opposition on multiple fronts and defend regime strongholds, such as Damascus, Tartous and Latakia.

The formation of the NDF have helped the SAA solve such setbacks that,

This new formation meets a number of the government’s needs. First, men who joined the NDF did so voluntarily and, as such, the risk of defection is low. Second, the NDF gives a much needed numerical boost to government forces throughout the country. Third, NDF fighters, as irregular or paramilitary elements, are receiving training in asymmetrical, urban, and guerrilla warfare - a style of war that the Syrian army was not prepared for, and which happens to be the dominant fighting mode of the opposition. Not all NDF members have completed their mandatory military service (conscripted), so the government is allowing members to meet their conscription term in the NDF. Military officers attached to NDF units are in charge of coordinating with the regular army, planning operations, and calling in artillery and air support.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>37</sup> “Syria Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces.” *The Carter Center* (2013): 8, accessed July 6, 2016, [http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict-mapping.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict-mapping.html)

The NDF is mainly used to defend regime strongholds while the SAA launch offensive operations. However, the NDF has assisted the SAA in offensive operations, such as in Aleppo because “these militias, unlike regular troops that come from different parts of the country, enjoy extensive knowledge of the local neighborhoods-turned-battlefields.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the NDF has been essential in helping Assad’s forces maintain the war effort. It is also important to note that the NDF has been counterproductive in protecting Syria’s religious minorities because according to a Christian NDF fighter named Samer, “the Iranians kept telling us that this war is not against Sunnis but for the sake of Syria. But the Alawites on the course kept saying they want to kill the Sunnis and rape their women in revenge,” said Samer.”<sup>39</sup> This has exacerbated the conflict by increasing the sectarian dynamic of it which Sunni jihadist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS exploit for recruitment and justify the killing of minorities in the name of protecting Sunni communities. However, not all Sunnis buy into the jihadist narrative or the revolution. Instead, they support the regime because they have benefited from Bashar Al-Assad’s economic liberalization policies in the early 2000s.

### **The Damascus Spring and the ‘Urban Sunnis’**

Since the eruption of civil war, the Assad regime has lost support from the majority of the Sunni periphery, who have taken up arms against the regime. However, it is important to note that Bashar Al-Assad still retains support from a minority Sunni group called Urban Sunnis. This is a social-economic class who benefited economically and politically during a period in the early 2000s called the Damascus Spring. When Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he inherited a failing economy where “Syria was the second poorest country in the Middle East

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2013, accessed June 24, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>

following Yemen before Bashar's economic reforms."<sup>40</sup> The deteriorating economy could have ignited social unrest that could have threatened the ruling bargain. Realizing the structural weakness of the country, Bashar Al-Assad initiated economic and political reform to ensure stability. Economically, Assad launched reforms included "the privatization of some state-run industries and lowered tariffs on imported goods, following an economic model promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank."<sup>41</sup> As a result, wealthy Sunnis were able to purchase state-owned businesses or create their own business, such as insurance or telecommunication companies.

Also, Bashar Al-Assad initiated political reform in this period where he presided over partial revival of Sunni Islam within state accepted circles by creating friendly relationships with moderate Sunni leaders."<sup>42</sup> By developing relationships with moderate Sunni leaders, Assad integrated Sunnis into the ruling-bargain to improve the regime's legitimacy with the Sunni community and bring the various religious sects together. Some Sunnis who have been appointed during this period where Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and Vice President Najah Al-Attar."<sup>43</sup> However, the Damascus Spring was short-lived and Bashar-Al Assad went back to governing the country like his father did. Therefore, this period of reform was an attempt by Assad to strengthen the authoritarian structure by integrating Sunnis into a largely minority regime.

Today, the civil war has so severely weakened the economy that the World Bank notes,

After rising by nearly 90 % in 2013, inflation is estimated to have increased by 30 in 2015 and is estimated to grow by 25 % in 2016 because of continued trade disruption, shortages and sharp depreciation of the Syrian pound. Also, revenues from oil exports decreased from \$4.7 billion in 2011 to an estimated \$0.22 billion

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<sup>40</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 128.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*,

in 2014, and are estimated to have declined further to \$0.14 billion in 2015 as most of Syria's oil fields are under control of opposition forces of ISIS. Therefore, current account balance is estimated to continue its trend and reach a deficit of 22 and 15 % of GDP in 2015 and 2016, respectively.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the growing economic crisis many urban Sunnis still support the regime because they fear losing everything they gained during the Damascus Spring. Also, they fear of being targeted by jihadist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS. Therefore, like other minorities, they have formed pro-regime militias like the Al-Quds Brigades and the Ba'ath Brigades, which "are almost entirely Sunni"<sup>45</sup> These militias have lifted some burden from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) by guarding checkpoints in Damascus or fighting on the front lines in critical cities like Aleppo.

The past couple of sections demonstrate how Assad co-opted minorities to the ruling bargain by analyzing how Alawites, Christians, Druze and Urban Sunnis have benefited from the regime and their fears if Assad falls. The cooptation of minorities has not only led to the creation of the NDF or other independent militias, but has integrated these communities into the regime that a 'State Bourgeoisie' has been formed, which will be analyze in the next section.

### **The Formation of the 'State Bourgeoisie'**

By coopting minorities into the ruling bargain, Hafiz Al-Assad created a ruling coalition or what "Bassam Haddad calls 'The State Bourgeoisie'"<sup>46</sup> This constitutes as Assad's inner circle who control institutions like the Military, Mukhabarat (secret police) and the Ba'ath Party. Those appointed into these critical positions of power are Assad's relatives and friends. Also,

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<sup>44</sup> "The World Bank," Syria's Economic Outlook-Spring 2016, accessed July 6, 2016, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>

<sup>45</sup> Edward Dark, "Pro-regime Sunni Fighters in Aleppo Defy Sectarian Narrative," *Al Monitor*, March 14, 2014, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/syria-aleppo-sunni-quds-baath-brigades.html>

<sup>46</sup> Bassam Haddad, "Syria's State Bourgeoisie: An Organic Backbone for the Regime", *Middle East Critique* 21 3 (2012): 232.

they tend to be minorities, especially Alawite like Assad himself. An example is Maher Al-Assad who is the son of Hafiz Al-Assad and younger brother of current president Bashar Al-Assad. He commands critical military units, such as the Republican Guard and 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. However, it is important to note that Sunnis were not excluded from the ‘State Bourgeoisie’, but constitute a minority. A prominent Sunni figure who rose through the ranks of the military was “Mustafa Talas who was from a Sunni background and served as Minister of Defense from 1972 to 2004 because of his friendship and loyalty to Assad since the Ba’athist Coup of 1963.”<sup>47</sup> This shows that not only relation to the president in terms of blood or religious affiliation was critical to become part of the State Bourgeoisie, but loyalty was a critical aspect as well.

The creation of the State Bourgeoisie based on blood, religious affiliation and loyalty was to guarantee regime survival and consolidation because Syria had a turbulent past prior the Assad’s rise to power. Coups were persistent to the extent that in “1949 the country experience three within a year.”<sup>48</sup> However, the past forty-five years that the Assad family has been in power, there was only one attempted coup in late 1983. According Nikolaos Van Dam, “The only time since the early 1970s when the regime has been really shaken from within its own organization was in November 1983, when Hafiz fell seriously ill and the question of his succession appeared to become acute.”<sup>49</sup> Hafiz’s brother Rif’at tried to assume control when Assad was temporary incapacitated. However, Assad made a full recovery, assumed control, quickly brought an end to the coup and exiled his brother for an indefinite amount of time.

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<sup>47</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba’ath Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 68-69.

<sup>48</sup> John McHugo, *Syria: A Recent History* (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 126-129.

<sup>49</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba’th Party* (New York: I.B. Tarius & Co Ltd, 2011), 118.

Also, the nature of the State Bourgeoisie has limited defections in today's conflict that "only 47 people (27 high-ranking military and law enforcers, three Cabinet members, four members of the parliament, and 12 diplomats) defected between June 2011 and August 2012 and none of them belonged to the president's closest circle of decision makers."<sup>50</sup> Preserving the State bourgeoisie has been essential for the survival of the Assad regime because it has provided the regime a support base to counter the opposition. In other countries like Tunisia and Egypt, Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak fell because they could not preserve the State Bourgeoisie. According to Mehran Kamrava, "when the military realized that the unfolding crisis could not be stopped and that the continued alliance with the civilian leadership could harm its professional and corporate interests, it deliberately distanced itself from civilian dictators making their demise inevitable."<sup>51</sup> The defection of the military in both countries led to the corrosion of the State Bourgeoisie and caused their regime's to collapse.

Yet in Syria, the military is integrated within the regime because Assad has appointed relatives within critical positions of the military like Maher. State institutions are deeply embedded in the regime to where "the ruling elite, and the secret police are so intertwined that it is now impossible to separate the Assad regime from the security establishment."<sup>52</sup> As a result, every institution is integrated into the regime to consolidate its control. This has enabled Assad to survive by confronting the opposition on multiple war fronts and exploit sectarianism, which undermines the prerequisite for democratization, the need of national unity.

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<sup>50</sup> Sargon Hadaya, "A Proxy War in Syria", *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy & International Relations* 59 6 (2013): 176

<sup>51</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East," in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 40.

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

### **Sectarianism and the Absence of National Unity**

The Assad regime's exploitation of sectarianism has turned Syrians against each other. As a result, this has undermined the prospects of democracy in Syria because the country lacks national unity, which is the prerequisite for democratization. According to Georg Sorensen, "national unity simply indicates that "the vast majority of citizens in democracy-to-be...have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to."<sup>53</sup> Prior to the conflict, Syrians lived side by side regardless of religious affiliation. This is demonstrated when a Christian university professor named Hagop describes that his "town is twelve miles from central Damascus, the town is mixed between Sunni, Christian and Druze and before the crisis residents formed friendships and business relations that extended among all religious groups."<sup>54</sup>

Today, trust among the various religious communities has eroded.

An example is when an Alawite government employee name Ebrahim says, "If you're invited to dinner by a Sunni, you would be afraid of an ambush, so you would refuse."<sup>55</sup> This suspicion derives from the fact that Assad has labelled the majority of the Sunni opposition as terrorists, who want to exterminate minorities. Portraying the conflict in a sectarian narrative has benefited the regime because it rallies minorities to support it. It also provides justification for the murdering of Sunnis by regime forces. Also, jihadists benefit from the sectarian overtone of the conflict. It attracts recruits to their cause and provides justification to massacre minorities. The sectarian overtone of the conflict has divided Syrians against each other to the extent that the main goal of the revolution, which was to overthrow Assad and bring democracy has been

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<sup>53</sup> Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization: Process and Prospects in a Changing World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>54</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 134.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 125

disoriented. Now it appears removing Assad has become a secondary objective and everyone is fighting mainly to carve out a piece of territory for themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Cooptation, legitimacy, external factors and repression are explanations that explain the survival and consolidation of authoritarianism. From these four, cooptation is the most essential because autocrats need a support base to survive. To form a support base, an autocrat will co-opt aspects of society by granting privileges in terms of power, wealth and security in exchange for support. Once the autocrat obtains supporters, then his rule will be legitimized and the authoritarian structure will be consolidated. After a ruling coalition is formed, the autocrat will seek alliances abroad to further consolidate his rule. To forge alliances, the autocrat will relinquish some state sovereignty in exchange for political, military and economic support. Establishing alliances will legitimize the regime abroad to the extent that some states will assist the regime in times of political unrest because a foreign power's interests will be threatened as well.

Despite having legitimacy domestically and abroad, authoritarianism is still an unstable form of government. The system will encounter threats internal and external, but mostly the former. To neutralize these threats, the regime will attempt to co-opt its enemies, but after a while it will fail and the regime will lose legitimacy. Therefore, the autocrat will rely on repression and his foreign allies to survive. This will maintain the status quo for a short period of time, but in the long run repression will eventually backfire and exacerbate political unrest and foreign allies will abandon their ally if political unrest is persistent because it will take a toll on the country.

In Syria, the civil war is a protracted conflict with no immediate end in sight. Thousands of Syrians have perished, millions have become refugees and internally displaced peoples. Despite losing significant amounts of territory like the Raqqa governorate in 2013 and the Idlib governorate in 2014 to opposition forces, Assad has defied the odds by surviving more than five years of conflict and has consolidated his rule in the Damascus, Tartous and Latakia governorates. Also, the regime has made significant gains within the past year against the opposition. An example is when regime forces backed by direct Russian military intervention re-captured the city of Palmyra from ISIS in March 2016. The Russian military intervention is an important dynamic in the Syrian conflict, but Assad has survived years of conflict before Russia's intervention. Before Russia's military intervention, the war was a stalemate, where offensive operations were limited and both regime and opposition forces targeted each other's infrastructure with airstrikes and car bombs in an attempt demoralize each other. Russia's military intervention merely has enabled Assad to break the stalemate and go on the offensive, but does not explain his survival.

My research demonstrates how the regime has relied on a coalition of support for survival and how the sectarian nature of the conflict does not only cross religious lines, but socioeconomic as well. Alawites, Christians and Druze support the regime because it provides them with privileges and security. These communities fear retribution and marginalization if the regime falls. Their concerns have rallied the communities around the regime and helped bolster its forces by forming militias. Despite the fact the majority of Sunnis have rebelled against Assad, he still retains significant amounts of support from Urban Sunnis, who have benefited from the economic reforms of the early 2000s. They too fear what will happen to them if the ruling bargain collapses. Having Sunni support has denied the opposition a quick and absolute

victory. Some Sunnis have taken up arms to fight alongside the regime by forming militias as well.

Unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi, Assad still retains support from the State Bourgeoisie because critical positions are controlled by his relatives and minorities. Constructing a ruling bargain based on relatives and minorities has decreased the likelihood of defections and coups. Those who turn against the regime will not only lose their privileges, but their security as well. They will face retribution from opposition forces, especially from extremists groups like ISIS. However, with the war of attrition and a failing economy one could wonder how long will this coalition remain loyal? My analysis will help U.S. policymakers become aware of why some groups are unwilling to abandon the regime. These communities are convince there is no future for them in a post-Assad Syria. Guaranteeing these groups they have a future, may bring the country together and bring forth the first phase of the democratic process, the breakdown of the authoritarian structure.

However, Assad's manipulation of the country's heterogeneous nature has created multiple hurdles to overcome. How does a society restore faith in each other when everyone is fearful, suspicious and hold deep grievances towards each other? Unless faith is restored, the sectarian struggle will continue to escalate and groups like ISIS will continue to wreak havoc throughout the region and internationally. For Syria, the mostly likely scenario if the conflict continues is the partitioning of the country among the different factions like Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. So far Assad has been resilient to where political scientist Elie El-Hindy says, "Assad was clever to play on the divergence in society and make people scared of each other."<sup>56</sup> Assad's ability to exploit the various identities and pinning them against each other has

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<sup>56</sup>Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 65.

prevented him from meeting similar fates like Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi. Instead the regime has been able to survive and fight another day.

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