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

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## Introduction

The Arab Spring was a regional social mobilization that unrevealed ruling-bargains in the Middle East, which have been resilient since the early 1950s. In Tunisia, Ben Ali was ousted in about three weeks and fled to Saudi Arabia. After two weeks of demonstrations in Egypt, Mubarak resign from the presidency because the police failed to quell the uprising and the military refused to come to his aid. Following his resignation, he was arrested by the military and is currently awaiting trial for killing demonstrators, embezzlement of state funds, etc. In Libya, Qaddafi was ousted in an eight month civil war with NATO intervention that resulted in his demise. Despite the successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, some ruling-bargains have survived, 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 Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi. However, overtime the conflict morphed into a sectarian struggle that divided the country among sectarian and socioeconomic lines. The sectarian nature of the conflict has prevented the regime from falling. As a result, my research question is how does identity politics explain the resilience of Assad's ruling bargain? This question is important because it will explain the survival of authoritarianism and how identity politics can hinder the perquisite for democratization, the need for national unity. It will also help U.S. policymakers by showing them the concerns of minorities if the regime 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 they have a future will bring down Assad and may bring fourth democratization.

This paper will first explain what authoritarianism is and explore factors that contribute to the survival of authoritarianism, such as repression, legitimacy, external factors and cooptation. Finally, an analysis will be provided to explain how Assad has manipulated Syria's heterogeneous nature to ensure his survival by demonstrating how Alawites, Christians, Druze, the Sunni bourgeoisie and the State bourgeoisie have benefited from the ruling bargain. Along with how they have helped propped up Assad, such as forming paramilitary groups and how the ruling elite have remain loyal in a time of crisis. Since the uprising began, defections have rampant the ruling bargain. However, defections primarily occur in the lower positions of power, which are predominantly Sunni while Alawites control the upper echelons of power. These defections have gradually created a storage of man power to confront the opposition and defend strategic positons.

However, the formation of paramilitaries under the National Defense Forces (NDF) have solved this problem. Also, the growing sectarian nature of the civil war has made minorities more dependent on the regime for protection because of the fear of being targeted by fundamentalist elements of the opposition like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Finally, Assad has retain support from critical institutions in society like the military. This due to the fact that critical positions are filled with close relatives to Assad. From the role of minorities in the conflict and having a family based regime, my thesis is the cooptation of minorities and relatives into the ruling bargain has enabled Assad's regime to survive.

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

Authoritarianism is a system to govern society where order and control is favored over liberty. In authoritarianism, society is either ruled by a single individual with absolute power, or

a ruling coalition where power is distributed within the coalition. In most cases the ruling coalition usually makes up about one percent of society. The coalition consists of different aspects of society, such as institutions that support the regime for privileges like power, wealth and security in exchange for support. An example is when Gretchen Casper states in *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule*, “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>1</sup> The church and military are examples of institutions that can be part of the coalition.

Under authoritarian rule, the one percent monopolizes power and the majority is largely excluded from different aspects of society like the political and economic realms. An example of an authoritarian regime is in Syria where the Assad family has ruled the country for the past forty-five years. Assad has monopolized power by putting loyal family members and friends in the upper echelons of society regardless of their qualifications. As a result, this has excluded the majority of Syrians from having a role in governing the country. The purpose of this is to ensure the survival of the regime and maintain the status quo.

However, one of the main drawbacks of authoritarianism is that it’s an unstable form of government in the long-run. 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>2</sup>

Within the forty-five years that the Assad family has ruled Syria, the regime experienced three events that have shaken the regime to its core. From 1979 to 1982, there was an Islamist

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<sup>1</sup>Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), 4

<sup>2</sup>Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995),6

insurgency that almost pushed the country to the brink of civil war. In 1983, there was an attempted coup by Hafiz Al-Assad's brother Rif'at when Assad was incapacitated due to an illness. Finally, there is the current civil war that has tested the regime to its limits. Despite the challenges autocrats encounter, many of them have been able to survive for long periods of time like Assad. As a result, scholars have developed four theories to explain the resilience of authoritarianism. These theories consist of repression, legitimacy, external factors and cooptation.

### **Repression**

The first school of thought consists of repression. Repression is the state's use of coercion to restrict the ability of the majority from participating in the political realm of society. In *Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy*, Abel Escriba-Folch acknowledges Davenport's claim that, "state coercion has two basic components: violent repression that violates personal integrity and less violent (or nonviolent) activities that restrict civil liberties."<sup>3</sup> Both violent and nonviolent methods of coercion are utilized by autocrats to maintain order.

Scholars like Abel Escriba-Folch, Sergei Guriev, Daniel Treisman, and Ronald A. Francisco analyze whether repression is an effective strategy to increase the chances of survival for an authoritarian system. Abel Escriba-Folch proclaims, "The results reveal that repression certainly increases the likelihood of dictators' survival."<sup>4</sup> His analysis of the relationship between survival and repression demonstrates that repression is effective in increasing the chances of survival. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman in *How Modern Dictators Survive:*

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<sup>3</sup> Abel Escriba-Folch, "Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy," *International Political Science Review* 34 5 (2013): 546

<sup>4</sup> Abel Escriba-Folch, "Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy," *International Political Science Review* 34 5 (2013): 543

*Cooptation, Censorship, Propaganda, and Repression* also assert that repression is an effective strategy. However, 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>5</sup> From their research repression acts as a useful means when all other methods have been exhausted to quell unrest.

The main dilemma with the use of repression is it can generate resentment towards the state and backfire. For example, Ronald A. Francisco proclaims in *Repression and Mobilization*, “Lichbach’s theorems demonstrate that consistent repression necessarily increases the amount of revolutionary zeal in a country.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Syria, repression did work when Hafiz Al-Assad crushed the Islamist insurgency in Hama of 1982. Yet, when Bashar followed his father’s strategy, repression backfired by increasing the revolutionary of zeal among Syrians, sparked international outrage and ignited an armed insurgency.

### **Legitimacy**

The second school of thought is legitimacy. Legitimacy involves the notion whether the public accepts the ruling regime. Paul Brooker proclaims in *Non-Democratic Regimes*, “One critical aspect for the consolidation of authoritarian rule involves seeking legitimacy.”<sup>7</sup> In democratic societies, the majority of the public does not question the legitimacy of their leaders because they gain their right to lead through fair elections, where the public votes for their rulers. In the case of autocrats, they have to prove why the public should accept them. They often rely

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<sup>5</sup> Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *How Modern Dictators Survive: Cooptation, Censorship, Propaganda, and Repression* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2015), 1.

<sup>6</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.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 106

on nationalist sentiment to where Paul Brooker proclaims, “The majority of authoritarian rulers justify their rule by playing on national interests or patriotic claims.”<sup>8</sup>

However, some autocrats have survived with little legitimacy. Instead they generate fear in society by brutally crushing dissent and rely on their foreign alliances for support. Prior to the Syrian uprising, Assad justified his rule by claiming he is the only Arab leader willing to confront Israel. Despite his stance towards Israel, this did not prevent the majority of Syrians from rebelling against him. Assad lost legitimacy domestically, regionally and international due to his use of force to quell the demonstrations. The loss of legitimacy has weakened the regime but, it has been able to survive by crushing dissent, exploiting sectarianism and relying on Russia, China, Iran and Hezbollah for support.

### **External Factors**

External factors is the third school of thought. External factors includes the role of outsiders in a state’s affairs. Scholars like Nicole J. Jackson, Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger argue the role of external factors is essential to the survival of authoritarianism. According to Nicole J. Jackson in *International Politics and National Political Regimes: Promoting Democracy-Promoting Autocracy*, “external factors influence authoritarian states to maintain the status quo and further entrench authoritarian rule.”<sup>9</sup> Today, two states play a pivotal role in supporting authoritarian leaders, and they are Russia and China. Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger states in *Promoting- Democracy -Promoting Autocracy? International Politics and the National Political Regimes*, “the largest players are Russian and China both at the forefront of today’s intense intellectual interest in authoritarian renewal and what it means for

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 109

<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.

international politics.”<sup>10</sup> Foreign powers bolster authoritarian leaders by providing political, economic and military assistance.

An example is the Russian and Syrian relationship where Roy Allison states in *Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis*, “Russia has provided a diplomatic shield for Syrian state and bolstered it with arms supplies.”<sup>11</sup> Assad also receives support from Iran and Hezbollah in terms of economic and military. An example is when Milani Mohsen states in *Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism)*, “In July 2013, the two nations signed an agreement in which the Iranian Central Bank pledged to provide its Syrian counterpart with a \$3.6 billion line of credit to purchase Iranian oil in exchange for allowing Iran to invest the equivalent amount in Syria.”<sup>12</sup> This credit has enabled Assad to maintain the war effort by purchasing more arms.

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 close allies. The regime relies on repression, propaganda and cooptation to survive. The dependency on these methods have gradually turn North Korea into a totalitarian state over time, which is an extreme form of authoritarianism.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger, “Promoting- Democracy -Promoting Autocracy? International Politics and the National Political Regimes,” *Contemporary Politics* 16 1 (2010): 12.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis,” *International Affairs* 89 4 (2013): 795

<sup>12</sup> Mohsen Milani, “Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism),” *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 87.

## Cooptation

The final school of thought consists of cooptation. Cooptation is a tactic deployed by autocrats to incorporate components of society into the ruling bargain by providing privileges in exchange for support. Scholars like Beatriz Magaloni, Milan W. Svobik, Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, assert cooptation is critical for survival. According to Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski in *Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats*, “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>13</sup> The most common threat usually emerges within the regime itself.

To eliminate threats the regime co-opts forces in society that pose a threat, such as state institutions, members of civil society, etc. Beatriz Magaloni demonstrates in *Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule Power* how dictators eliminate threats when he 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>14</sup> Power is shared among different aspects of society to where a ruling coalition is formed that entrenches the authoritarian structure.

However, a persistent threat to the ruling coalition is factionalism. Members of the ruling elite may try to increase their power at the expense of others. An illustration is when Milan W. Svobik states in *Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes*, “When the members of the ruling coalition suspect that the dictator is making steps towards strengthening

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Politics Studies* 40 11 (2007): 1280.

<sup>14</sup> Beatriz Magaloni, “Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule Power,” *Comparative Politics Studies* 41 4/5 (2008): 738.

his position at their expense, they may stage a coup in order to stop him.”<sup>15</sup> An example is the Hafiz Al-Assad and Salah Jadid rivalry before Assad’s Corrective Movement of 1970. Both Assad and Jadid were from the Alawite community and were powerful figures in the Syrian Ba’thist ruling coalition. Gradually, tension brew between them, especially after the Arab’s defeat in the Six-Day War. According to Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba’th Party*, “The conflict took a more serious proportions after the Arab military defeat in June 1967, partly due to differences of opinion over military, foreign and socioeconomic policies which were then to be pursued.”<sup>16</sup>

The rivalry split the ruling coalition between an Assad faction and Jadid faction. In the end, Assad out maneuvered Jadid and ousted him in a coup called the Corrective Movement. After Assad came to power, he brought an end to Syria’s instability by purging Jadid supporters, interweaving minorities, family, and friends into the ruling bargain. Loyalists of Assad received security, power, and wealth in exchange for support. The cooptation of these groups has enabled the regime to survive because their interests are interwoven within the regime. If Assad falls, they risk losing everything they gained and becoming marginalized.

### **The Probable Explanation**

Repression, Legitimacy, External Factors and Cooptation are strategies utilize by authoritarian regimes to ensure their survival. From these four strategies cooptation presents the most compelling to explain the survival of autocrats. Repression is useful to eliminate threats to the status quo, but it can backfire by increasing the revolutionary zeal of the opposition. Assad’s use of repression to crush the peaceful demonstrations increased the revolutionary zeal of the

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<sup>15</sup> Milan W. Svobik, “Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53 2 (2009): 481.

<sup>16</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), 62.

opposition, drew international criticism and ignited an armed insurgency. Legitimacy is improbable because some regimes have survived with little legitimacy. Instead they rely on repression, manipulation and foreign support for survival, such as in Syria today. Assad has survived by eliminating dissent, exploiting sectarianism and relying on his foreign allies.

External factors is impractical because regimes have survived with little foreign support like North Korea. In Syria, support from Russia, China, Iran and Hezbollah have helped Assad by providing political, military and economic support. However, a critical component to Assad's survival is his strategy to demonize the opposition as terrorists and release fundamentalists with links to Al-Qaeda from prison. This strategy has rallied minorities around the regime and prevent humanitarian intervention because minorities and the international community fear the alternative if Assad falls. Cooptation presents the best explanation because when elements of society are integrated into the system, they benefit from the privileges granted to them in exchange for support.

Factionalism is a persistent threat to the ruling coalition. However, everyone must think twice before turning against the status quo because they could lose what they gain and plunge society into anarchy. Assad has survived by integrating Alawites, Christians, the Sunni Bourgeoisie and State Bourgeoisie into the ruling bargain. These groups have benefited from the regime in terms of security, power and wealth. They are reluctant to abandon Assad because they fear losing what they gained and becoming marginalized in a post-Assad Syria.

### **Alawites**

Syria is one of the most heterogeneous countries in the Middle East. According to Raymond Hinnebusch and David W. Lesch in *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, "Sunnis constitute 74 percent of the population, with Alawites at 12 percent,

Christians at 10 percent, Druzes at 3 percent and Jews other Muslim sects like Ismailis at 1 percent.”<sup>17</sup> For the past forty-five years, Syria has been ruled by an offshoot of Shia Islam minority called the Alawites. Prior to the Ba’thist coup of 1963 and Hafiz Al-Assad’s Corrective Movement in 1970, the Alawites were marginalized in society. They were discriminated and subordinate to Sunni domination. This treatment is demonstrated when Jomana Qaddour states in *Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria*, “Before Assad came into power, the portion of the Alawites society not enlisted in the military were often hired as servants to Sunnis.”<sup>18</sup>

However, when the Ba’thists took over in 1963, life changed for the community. According to Nikolaos Van Dam, “Alawites 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>19</sup> When Hafiz Al-Assad came to power, the community continued to prosper. Hafiz created a power base among his fellow Alawites and relatives by putting them in high government positions like the bureaucracy. Assad’s favoritism towards Alawites is demonstrated when Joshua Landis proclaims in *The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime is likely to Survive to 2013*, “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>20</sup> The percentage difference between Alawites and Sunnis demonstrates that the ruling bargain is sectarian.

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<sup>17</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>18</sup> Jomana Qaddour, “Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria”, *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 72.

<sup>19</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), 9.

<sup>20</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.

When the 2011 Syrian uprising began, it appeared the fall of Assad's ruling bargain was imminent. Bashar used repression like his father in Hama in 1982 to crush the uprising, but this time repression failed. Instead it backfired against the regime by exacerbating the situation. It increased the revolutionary zeal of the opposition, and severely undermined Assad's legitimacy to where he lost significant amounts of support from the Sunni periphery. The use of force also sparked international outrage. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership, the country was hit with sanctions, world leaders called for Assad to step down and the regime was plagued with defections.

Despite these setbacks, Assad has been able to survive by exploiting sectarianism. The regime demonizes the opposition as fundamentalists which makes minorities reluctant from defecting out of fear of an uncertain future. This strategy also makes the international community reluctant to overthrow Assad because fundamentalist groups like Al-Nusra and the ISIS have become the strongest elements of the opposition. The fear of Syria falling into the hands of fundamentalists has made the international community wary of intervening despite their disapproval of Assad. This strategy has also indoctrinated Alawites in believing they are nothing without the regime. Assad's indoctrination has generated concerns within the community. They fear retribution because some elements of the opposition perceive them as apostates, they consider the community guilty based on association, and messages have emerged within the opposition threatening Alawites. Jomana Qaddour captures the growing hostility towards Alawites when she states, "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>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jomana Qaddour, "Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria", *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 69.

The community also worries of becoming marginalize and subordinate to Sunni domination again. The fears of retribution and marginalization stems from observing the sectarianism that has unfolded in Iraq after the fall of Saddam in 2003. Sunnis are targeted and have become marginalized by the Shia government because they have been deemed guilty base on association. The indoctrination of the Alawite community enables the regime to prevent defections and sympathizing with the opposition by spreading fear within the community. This has caused the community to remain loyal to the regime and report those who try to flee or sympathize with the opposition. In one incident Jomana Qaddour proclaims, “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>22</sup> Assad’s exploitation of sectarianism has not only pin communities against each other, but have turn family members against each other within communities.

### **Christians**

Similar to Alawites, Christians have prospered under Assad. Christians have rose to prominent positions within the system and according to Reese Erlich in *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, “many Syrian Christians achieved higher incomes and educational levels than their Muslim counterparts, differences that persist today.”<sup>23</sup> Also, the ruling bargain drawn in Christian’s base on portraying the regime as secular. When Hafiz-Al Assad was in power, he emphasized the need to do away with sectarianism and embrace Syrian Ba’thist identity. Nikolaos Van Dam states, Assad urged the public to abandon sectarianism:

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<sup>22</sup> Jomana Qaddour, “Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria”, *Washington Quarterly* 36 4 (2013): 71.

<sup>23</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 133.

Islam is one thing and this gang is something else again. The Arab Ba’th 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 brother of the Christian and Muslim. If Syria had not always been above sectarianism, it would not now exist.”<sup>24</sup>

The regime’s secularism provided a blanket of security for Christians. However, when the uprising broke out the blanket of security corroded. In the beginning, hostilities were directed towards the regime and the Alawite community. As the conflict progress, extremists groups took root in the country and hostilities towards Christians started to emerge. According Mary Mikhael in *The Syrian War and the Christians of the Middle East*, “slogans such as "Syria is the land of the Prophet!" or "Syria is the land of jihad" filled the air and these were directed towards Christians and other minorities.”<sup>25</sup> These slogans have generated concerns within the community.

Now Christians no longer feel safe in their homeland. Violence has been inflicted upon them. An example when Reese Enrich tells the story of Maryam in the city Qusayr, “where masked man entered their apartment one night with the intent to kidnap all the Christian men in Qusayr.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Christian areas controlled by salafi fundamentalist groups like ISIS have been told to either convert or die. Due to the collapse of security within the country, many Christians have fled the country or moved to areas where the government still has firm control. The fear of Salafi fundamentalism has propelled Christians to rally around Assad, such as in Saidnaya. Frederik Pleitgen reports in *Pro-Government Forces Find a Haven at Syria Town’s*

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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), 95.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Mikhael, “The Syrian War and the Christians of the Middle East”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39 2 (2015): 70.

<sup>26</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 133.

*Christian Monastery*, “Syrian Christian fighters have aided the Syrian Army in propelling the Jabhat el-Nusra’s advance towards Saidnaya.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Druzes**

Compared to Alawites and Christians where the majority support Assad, it is difficult to pinpoint the Druze’s political affiliation because Firas Maksad states in *The Druze Dilemma for Foreign Affairs*, “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>28</sup> In the beginning of the conflict, the Druzes tried to maintained a neutral stance, but as Sarita Saad states in *Lebanon Druze wary of being dragged into Syria conflict*, “the killing of some of the sect’s religious leaders have dragged the community into the conflict.”<sup>29</sup>

Since becoming involved in the conflict, the community has been divided between supporting Assad or not. Similar to Christians, some Druzes support the regime because of its secularist nature. An example is when a Druze name Akba Abu Shaheen tells Reese Erlich, “It’s important for me not to live in a religious country, but in a secular country.”<sup>30</sup> Like other minorities the Druzes are fearful of being targeted by fundamentalists because they are perceived as heretics. As a result, some Druze have taken arms to defend their territory and form militias like the Jaysh Al-Muwahhideen, which mainly operates out of the Suwayda Province because it has the highest Druze population in the country.

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<sup>27</sup> Frederik Pleitgen, “Pro-Government Forces Find A Haven At Syria Town’s Christian Monastery”, *CNN*, January 24, 2014, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/24/world/meast/syria-christian-monastery/>

<sup>28</sup> Firas Mksad, “The Druze Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2014, accessed May 31, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2014-10-08/druze-dilemma>

<sup>29</sup> Sarita Saad, “Lebanon Druze Wary of Being Dragged into Syria Conflict,” *Al Monitor*, August 21, 2014, accessed May 31, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/08/syria-druze-under-attack-lebanon-potential-support.html>

<sup>30</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 194.

However, some Druzes have developed grievances towards Assad. According to Firas Maksad, “Their biggest grievance is 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>31</sup> The community has threaten 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 Druzes could be 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>32</sup> The loss of the Druzes could open a path to allow the opposition to march into Damascus.

### **Paramilitaries**

The concerns express by religious minorities provides Assad a support base and help bolster the regime’s military capabilities by forming paramilitary groups. These groups have been essential because the continuation of the war has taken its toll on the Syrian Army. According to the Carter Center in *Syria: Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces*, “Defections, desertions, battle losses, the challenges of urban warfare, and the war of attrition waged by the opposition significantly depleted the number of men available to fight.”<sup>33</sup> The formation of paramilitary groups have help the regime to solve problems involving the Syrian Army, such as defections and the military’s inexperience to fight an asymmetric war. The Carter Center proclaims:

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,

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<sup>31</sup> Firas Maksad, “The Druze Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2014, accessed May 31, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2014-10-08/druze-dilemma>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> “Syria Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces.” *The Carter Center* (2013): 8, accessed May 4, 2015, [http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict-mapping.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict-mapping.html)

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 (conscription), 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>34</sup>

These paramilitary groups have been used to defend territories under government control while the Syrian Army goes on the offensive. They have also aided government forces in offensive operations, such as in Aleppo because according to the Carter Center, “These militias, unlike regular troops that come from different parts of the country, enjoy extensive knowledge of the local neighborhoods-turned-battlefields.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, paramilitaries have been vital to help maintain the war effort.

### **Sunni Bourgeoisie**

Despite losing the majority of Sunni periphery, Assad still retains support from the Sunni bourgeoisie or urban Sunnis. They have been reluctant to join the opposition because they have benefited from Assad’s economic liberalization policies during the early 2000s. When Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he inherited a failing economy. Reese Erlich proclaims, “Syria was the second poorest country in the Middle East following Yemen before Assad’s economic reforms.”<sup>36</sup> The poor performance of the economy could have ignited social unrest that could have threaten the ruling bargain. However, Assad launched economic reforms, which according to Reese Erlich included, “the privatization of some state-run industries and lowered tariffs on imported goods, following an economic model promoted by the International Monetary

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 128.

Fund and the World Bank.”<sup>37</sup> The Sunni bourgeoisie were able to purchase state own businesses or create their own business like insurance or telecommunication companies. Assad’s economic liberalization bought loyalty from them.

The civil war has brought further strains on an already fragile economy. Reese Erlich addresses:

International sanctions against Syria, the loss of most exports, and the destruction of war sent the economy into a tailspin. Syria produced 425,000 barrels per day of crude oil in 2011, but that dropped to zero by the end of 2013 as rebels seized control of the oil fields. The Syrian gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.2 percent in 2010 but dropped to -21.8 percent in 2012 and -22.5 percent in 2013.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the growing economic crisis many urban Sunnis still support the regime because they fear losing everything they gained during Assad’s economic reforms. They also fear the country side because some affiliate themselves with more extremist factions of the opposition. Some support from the Sunni periphery has prevented the opposition from achieving victory because Sunnis in urban areas like Aleppo have formed pro-regime militias as well like the Al-Quds Brigades and the Ba’th Brigades, which Edward Dark states in *Pro-regime Sunni Fighters in Aleppo Defy Sectarian Narrative*, “are almost entirely Sunni”<sup>39</sup> These militias have lifted some burden from the Syrian Army by guarding checkpoints in Damascus or fighting on the front lines in critical cities like Aleppo.

### **State Bourgeoisie**

The sectarian nature of the ruling bargain has prevented defections in what Bassam Haddad calls the “State bourgeoisie” in *Syria’s State Bourgeoisie: An Organic Backbone for the*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>39</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>

*Regime*.<sup>40</sup> This group is Assad's inner circle who control institutions like the Military, Mukhabarat (secret police), Ba'th Party, Businesses, etc. The regime has suffered from defections, but Haddad states, "The main, and perhaps only, defections witnessed occurred at the lower and lower-middle levels within the army, with very few significant exceptions."<sup>41</sup> What makes Assad's inner circle and state institutions remain loyal is the fact the majority of the critical positions are filled by Assad's relatives. Joshua Landis, states in "The Regime" for *Frontlines*, "The brother in charge of security, cousins of the banking system, in laws of the military so in reality this is a family business"<sup>42</sup> Some examples to demonstrate members of the Assad family are in the upper echelons of power are Bashar's Assad's brother Maher (Alawite) who commands the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armor Division. Asama-Al Assad who is Syria's First Lady and a Sunni. Finally, Assad's cousin Rami Maklouf (Alawite) who according to Reese Erlich, "owns the country's largest cell phone company and made tens of millions of dollars base on family connections."<sup>43</sup>

Hafiz and Bashar put close relatives in the upper echelons of society to ensure their survival and to consolidate their power. This brought an end to the country's turbulent past prior to Assad's rise to power. Coups were a persistent occurrence to the extent that some governments collapsed within less than a year. For 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

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<sup>40</sup> Bassam Haddad, "Syria's State Bourgeoisie: An Organic Backbone for the Regime", *Middle East Critique* 21 3 (2012): 232.

<sup>41</sup> Bassam Haddad, "Syria's State Bourgeoisie: An Organic Backbone for the Regime", *Middle East Critique* 21 3 (2012): 231.

<sup>42</sup> Ramita Navi, "The Regime", *Front Lines* (November 8, 2011) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/syria-undercover/#b>

<sup>43</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 128.

its own organization was in November 1983, when Hafiz fell seriously ill and the question of his succession appeared to become acute.”<sup>44</sup> His brother Rif<sup>at</sup> 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.

Putting relatives in critical positions have also limit defections at the top when the regime encounters a crisis, such as the civil war today. Sargon Hadaya notes in *A Proxy War in Syria*, “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>45</sup> One of the critical proponents that led to Ben Ali’s and Mubarak’s downfall was the independent nature of the military from the regime. Mehran Kamrava states in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, “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>46</sup> In Syria, the military is integrated within the regime because Assad has appointed relatives within critical positions of the military like Maher. States institutions are deeply embedded in the regime to where Mehran Kamrava proclaims, “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>47</sup>

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<sup>44</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.

<sup>45</sup> Sargon Hadaya, “A Proxy War in Syria”, *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy & International Relations* 59 6 (2013): 176

<sup>46</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>47</sup> Ibid.

In order to become part of the ruling coalition or move up the ladder loyalty became a prerequisite to where to Joshua Landis notes in *The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime is likely to Survive to 2013*, “Under the Assads, loyalty quickly became the ultimate qualification for advancement into the upper ranks of the security forces.”<sup>48</sup> Those loyal to Assad benefited from the ruling bargain in terms of power, wealth and security in return for support. Assad integrated every institution into the ruling bargain to consolidate his control and make it where if any force threatens to bring down the regime, they will have to destroy the whole structure, construct a new ruling bargain from scratch and run the risk of turning Syria into the next Iraq or Libya.

### **The Absence of National Unity**

Assad’s exploitation of sectarianism has prevented minorities from defecting and sympathizing with the opposition out of fear. As a result, this has severely undermine the prospects of democracy in Syria because the country lacks the most fundamental prerequisite for a transition towards democracy, which is national unity. Georg Sorsensen states in *Democracy and Democratization: Process and Prospects in a Changing World*, “according to Rustow, 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>49</sup> Assad has undermine national unity by including some groups in the ruling bargain and excluding others.

Prior to the revolution, society trusted each other regardless of one’s religious affiliation. This is demonstrated when Reese Erlich describes a small town where a Christian university professor name Hagop lives, “the town is twelve miles from central Damascus, the town is

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<sup>48</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.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization: Process and Prospects in a Changing World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 47.

mixed between Sunni, Christian and Druze and before the crisis residents formed friendships and business relations that extended among all religious groups.”<sup>50</sup> Today, trust among the various religious communities have eroded and a deep mistrust has developed in society, where everyone is suspicious of each other. An example is when an Alawite government employee name Ebrahim tells Reese Erlich, “If you’re invited to dinner by a Sunni, you would be afraid of an ambush, so you would refuse.”<sup>51</sup> Assad has used sectarianism to his advantage by driving a wedge between the various groups. This strategy has fragmented society and disoriented the main purpose of the revolution, which is to overthrow Assad. Now it appears removing Assad has become a secondary objective and every group is fighting mainly to carve out a piece of territory for themselves.

### **Conclusion**

The Syrian civil war is now a war of attrition and recently Assad has suffered setbacks, such as the loss of the Idlib province to Islamist elements of the opposition. This is the second province that has fallen to the opposition following the Raqqa province in 2013. The prolongation of the conflict and if the regime continues to experience setbacks will take its toll on Assad’s forces by draining their moral and resources. Also, the war has drained the country’s economy where it struggles to provide goods and services. My findings demonstrate 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

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<sup>50</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 134.

<sup>51</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 125.

communities fear retribution and marginalization if the regime falls. Their concerns have rallied the communities around the regime and help bolster its forces by forming paramilitary groups.

Despite the fact the majority of Sunnis have rebelled against Assad, he still retains significant amounts of support from the Sunni bourgeoisie, 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 like the Ba'th Brigade. Unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi, Assad still retains support from the state bourgeoisie because critical positions are controlled by relatives. Constructing a ruling bargain base on minorities and relatives has decrease 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 be targeted by Assad's loyalists and the opposition. However, with the war of attrition, Assad's recent setbacks, 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. For Syria, the mostly likely scenario if the sectarian struggle 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 tells Erlich Reese, “Assad was clever to play on the divergence in society and make people scared of each other.”<sup>52</sup> Assad’s ability to exploit the various identities and pinning them against each other has 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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<sup>52</sup>Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 65

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