

Syria: A Predictable Future?
Domestic Power Shifts in the Arab Spring Era

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(reflects latest update in current events)

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As the Arab Spring movement continues to unfold and authoritarian regimes topple in unprecedented numbers, popular attention shifts to states still engaged in struggles for power and citizens searching for new political arrangements. One such state, Syria, stands out as the region's most pressing concern, as opposition groups from a wide range of ethnic and religious factions vie for future representation in protests against the Asad regime. While demonstrations continue, leaders, policy makers and citizens alike wonder: Will the Asad regime survive? If not, who will take control of the government, and how stable will it be? What are the regional implications for a shift in power in the state that Thomas Friedman calls "the keystone of the Levant"? (Friedman 1).

This thesis examines the nature of the Syrian regime and its opposition, as well as both groups' historical interactions, in order to provide a basis for educated predictions concerning Syria's future power structure. By tracing the interwoven developments of both the Asad regime and opposition groups since 1970, I hope to develop a series of well-informed and plausible outcomes regarding Syria's future political structure and its subsequent regional influence.

While select scholarly works touch on Syrian dissent or the history of the Asad family rule, few, if any, attempt a systematic evaluation of both the Asad regime and opposition capabilities. Furthermore, a mere handful of writings to date evaluate the Arab Spring in a detailed historical context. Close examination of both

topics is essential not only to our understanding of Syria's current protest movement, but to its likely future implications as well.

In order to make the most plausible predictions, I will break down my analysis of Syrian political dynamics into four sections. In the first section, I intend to dissect the central strengths and weaknesses of the Asad regime from 1971 to the present. This section identifies key features of the regime that will help or hinder the developing opposition. I will argue that some aspects of the regime, such as its ethnic minority control of key military units, will make it very difficult for the opposition to secure army defections sufficient for a successful coup. Others, such as the regime's steadily declining economy, increase the likelihood that the opposition will obtain critical support from the general Syrian public.

Second, I will trace the activity and organization of Syria's opposition from the ascendancy of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 until his death in 2000. Although it would be useful to examine the opposition in much the same topical fashion as I adopt for the regime, the opposition's constantly shifting alliances and extended absences from the Syrian political scene necessitate a chronological assessment of the group's activities and their effectiveness.

Next, I will conduct a similar review of the Syrian opposition from the rise of Bashar al-Asad until the beginning of the Arab Spring movement at the end of 2010. By examining the activity of Syria's opposition, subsequent regime reactions, and the relative success of past protests, I will be able to offer credible predictions concerning the immediate outcome of the current protest movement. Furthermore, such an analysis allows for educated hypotheses regarding the future success of a

new Syrian government, should one be created, as well the domestic and foreign policy implications of such a development.

The final section of my thesis will argue that based on the opposition's demographic variety and historical relationship to the regime, civil war is the most likely outcome of Syria's months-long protests.

Ultimately, this thesis intends to illuminate not just development of the regime, its opposition and the probable political outcomes for the Syrian nation, but also to provide knowledge basic to making informed policy choices in the future.

Chapter One:

The Syrian Regime: Strengths and Weaknesses

This section aims to dissect the regime's central capabilities and limits. Such an analysis will reveal the government's ability to absorb and combat dissent, as well as the opposition's ability to capitalize on the regime's shortcomings and circumvent its relative strengths. Ultimately, it is the Syrian population's perceptions of these strengths and weaknesses that will determine the course of the protest movement.

Key Regime Strengths

We shall begin with a consideration of regime strengths, or the unique powers, relationships and characteristics associated with Syrian government that help safeguard its ruling position. I intend to show that both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad's deliberate structuring of the military, unrivaled capacity for decision-making, and coordination with state-controlled intelligence and media make organized attempts at political dissent extremely difficult to execute. These strengths have effectively stymied the opposition, and are primarily responsible for the current violent stalemate between government and rebel forces that threatens to devolve into total civil war.

1. Alawite Islamic Credentials and Political Dominances

Since Hafiz-al-Asad came to power in 1970, the political and military elite in Syria's government have always been Alawis. A secretive Muslim sect native to

northwest Syria, Alawis are typically classified as a branch of Shiite Islam and comprise a mere 12 percent of Syria's overwhelmingly Sunni population ("CIA: Syria"). Historically, Alawis faced regular discrimination from Muslim groups who challenged the former's status as true believers in Islam.¹ Despite challenges to their authority as suspect Muslims and as minority rulers, the Syrian Alawi regime has maintained its grip on power by perfecting various ideological and organizational techniques. In particular, the regime's self-identification with the Muslim faith, consolidation of the military and recognized status as a champion of the Palestinian cause positioned Asad as the primary supporter of important Muslim issues and ensured the ruling regime could overcome efforts to delegitimize it.

Both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad struggled to assert themselves as credible rulers based on both their Alawi and secular-nationalist Ba'th party affiliations. Sunni objections to the disproportionate representation of Alawis in military and political posts in the 1960s intensified following Hafiz al-Asad's rise to the Syrian presidency in 1970. Islamic groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brothers cried out against the President, arguing that illegitimate Alawis did not satisfy the Syrian constitution's requirement that the President be a Muslim (Rabinovich, "View" 115). Simultaneously, these groups criticized the ruling Ba'th party for its secular political platform.

¹ While both Shiites and Alawis believe in Ali and the 12 imams, several Alawi beliefs are not shared by the general Shiite population and are the central source of debate on Alawi legitimacy within the Muslim community. For example, Alawi conviction in the transmigration of souls and status of Ali as superior to Muhammad are key divergences from the beliefs of regular Shiite Muslims (Talhamy).

Clearly, Asad needed to take decisive actions to promote the credibility of his regime. Only two years after his acquisition of power, Asad was attempting to garner support from respected Muslim authorities across the Middle East. In 1972, Hasan al-Shirazi, a notable Iraqi cleric, declared that Alawis were indeed Shiite Muslims. One year later, Musa al-Sadr, head of the Lebanese Shiite Supreme Council, provided Asad with the same certification. And in 1974, Asad fulfilled his obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, satisfying one of the five central pillars of Islam (Talhamy).² These actions, combined with complete government control of the media, meant that Asad could confidently proclaim his commitment to Islam to the rest of the nation. While Asad's self-promoting propaganda did not silence the Islamist opposition, it surely made it more difficult for a largely uninformed public to question the Muslim identity of their President.

Like his father, Bashar al-Asad sought to associate himself closely with Islamic causes from the outset of his presidency in 2000. While supporting the routine and violent (but secret) suppression of dissident Islamist voices like the Muslim Brotherhood, Asad publicly reached out to Muslim groups on multiple fronts. Domestically, he continued his father's legacy of funding new mosques and Muslim community centers. Internationally, he maintained the relationships his father had established with radical anti-Israel Islamist elements operating in Lebanon and the occupied territories (Lesch, "New Lion" 113).

² Asad also emphasized his connections with Islam at a more local level. He was known to pray in mosques on Fridays, as well as endorse the construction of new mosques and religious centers throughout the period of his rule (Talhamy).

As Radwan Ziadeh astutely notes, Bashar al-Asad (like his father) cleverly positioned himself among various Muslim groups to retain power by “support[ing] nonpolitical Islam at home so that Syrian Sunni Muslims will be grateful to the regime, sponsor[ing] radical Islamism abroad so that Islamist groups [...] will ally with the Syrian government and not support counterparts who want to overthrow it [...], and persuad[ing] liberal-minded Syrians that if they challenge the regime, the ultimate winners will be the Islamists” (Ziadeh 64). Essentially, Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad were successfully able to shift the Syrian population’s focus away from the issue of minority rule by supporting a wide variety of Islamist groups.

Second, both rulers ensured the continuity of the Alawi regime by maintaining an overwhelming Alawi majority in key units of the Syrian military. As early as the 1960s, large numbers of minorities within Syria, including Alawis, flocked to the military for employment (Talhamy 1). When Asad came to power in 1970, he identified loyalty and military experience as the two critical factors for placement in senior leadership positions (Ziadeh 17).³ Noting the strong Alawi presence in the Syrian military, Asad aligned himself with, and later promoted, Alawi soldiers. Their complete domination of key military positions is clearly shown when examining the composition of the military’s top positions at the time of Hafiz al-Asad’s death in 2000, when over 90 percent of generals were Alawites (Rubin, “Truth” 52).

After acquiring power, Bashar al-Asad wasted no time in securing the loyalties of the Syrian military. Syria’s new leader favored a familiar military

³ Indeed, following Bashar’s acquisition of power, the vast majority of Hafiz’s “old guard” leadership had no academic backgrounds whatsoever (Ziadeh 49).

leadership: his brother leads the military's Presidential Guard, while several cousins control the Republican Guard and the nation's best special forces units (52).

Furthermore, Alawis control the most important army divisions and air force units, virtually guaranteeing Alawi military supremacy in internal confrontations. To ensure that none of the Syrian army's Sunni divisions, which comprise 9 out of 11 total, can ever stage a coup, none "are allowed anywhere near Damascus, and are heavily monitored by the Alawi Mukhabarat (secret intelligence) for loyalty" (Landis and Pace).

Bashar's capabilities in maintaining unity within the military extend to the current protest situation. Although thousands of Syria's low-ranking soldiers have defected as of January 2012, senior military defections are still rare. Asad's most experienced and most powerful military personnel largely remain loyal, despite the steadily climbing civilian death toll that has now reached well over 6,000.

Foreseeing the potential for further defections, Asad routinely deploys Alawi special forces units, troops and military intelligence to suppress protestors (Landis and Pace 1). This ensures that Syria's Sunni troops receive minimal exposure to violent clashes with their fellow Sunni majority, which could create clear conflicts of interest.

2. Power of the Presidency: Manipulating Syria's Constitution

Syria's political structure further contributes to the Asad regime's thorough monopolization of power. Syria's constitution grants the President almost unlimited powers in determining the direction of the state, regardless of whether decisions

concern political, legislative, judicial, extrajudicial or military matters. A closer examination of specific components of this document shows the degree of control the Asads have wielded over Syrian politics since 1970:

1. Article 94 states that the President's laws serve as the foundation for the state's foreign policy
2. Article 103 designates the President as the commander of the Syrian army and armed forces
3. Article 107 authorizes the President to dissolve the People's Assembly (similar to a Parliament)
4. Article 111 authorizes the President to legislate when the People's Assembly is not in session
5. Article 95 grants the President the right to appoint the Vice President and determine his responsibilities, appoint the Prime Minister, and appoint and remove ministers at will
6. Article 101 allows the President to declare a state of emergency at will (Ziadeh 15)⁴

Not only can the President make nearly any decision under the Syrian constitution, he can alter its contents when they obstruct a desired course of action.

Preceding Hafiz al-Asad's death, members of Syria's military and political elite

⁴ Emergency law, which allows the government to make arbitrary arrests and permitted a huge host of other security-related civil rights infringements, was in effect for 48 straight years previous to the Arab Spring protest movement. Bashar al-Asad justified the continuation of emergency law by citing the threats of the Muslim Brotherhood, Israel, Lebanon and declared the law would continue as long as there was instability in Iraq and no peace with Israel. Asad stated, "the emergency law is not used to suppress freedoms but to suppress terrorism, and there is a huge difference" (Lesch, "New Lion" 89).

prepared for a smooth power transition to his son Bashar. Although the postmortem transfer of power was unremarkable, the involved parties encountered one obstacle: Article 83 of the Syrian constitution required the President of the state to be at least forty years old. Almost immediately and under Asad's direction, the People's Assembly voted to change Article 83, stipulating the President could only take office if he had passed Asad's exact age of 34 (Ziadeh 25).

In reality, the Syrian People's Assembly is merely a manifestation of the President's wishes. According to Ziadeh, Hafiz al-Asad would rarely even attend legislative sessions, opting instead to send lists of his commands for legal ratification (22). It is a puppet body that mimics the structure of other legitimate governments in order to gain legitimacy and serve the direct interest of the President. By allowing the President virtually limitless constitutional powers in the context of a seemingly legitimate parliamentary system, elements of the regime (Asad and his inner circle) are free to act without restraint in quelling dissent and to authorize any decision that furthers their grip on power.

The President's role as the leader of the Ba'th party further guarantees his oversight of important decision-making bodies. Although technically not the only Syrian political party, the Ba'th controls almost every aspect of Syrian government and wholly eclipses the handful of nominally independent socialist parties the regime allows to operate under tight restrictions. Making consequential decisions of any kind in the Syrian government requires Ba'th party affiliation.

Up to 10 percent of the population are members of the Ba'th party, exceeding 1.8 million in 2008. And according to a 2000 Ba'th party report, approximately 36

percent of members are students (Rubin, "Truth" 45). Representing the future political elite, students are recruited to the party to establish early ties with the regime and thus allow Syria's security services time to investigate fully each individual (45).

Furthermore, under the Ba'th party system, active members who have completed two years of training are prioritized for high positions in the military, security apparatus, and ministries.⁵ Placing well-known, fully-researched party members in high-ranking government positions simultaneously lessens the likelihood that such individuals will oppose the government and allows the regime's security apparatus to monitor their activity.

3. Syria's Secret Intelligence Community

In order to retain total power, Asad employs thousands of agents of Syria's *mukhabarat* to serve as the regime's main informational source and enforcement tool. Although little concrete information is available regarding the operation and composition of Syria's intelligence services, it is widely known that the group is the central instrument in both the surveillance of Syrian citizens and repression of dissent. According to Ziadeh, the security apparatus is comprised of several units, including a General Intelligence Administration responsible for state security, a political security wing that exclusively monitors dissent activity, and a military intelligence wing (Ziadeh 23). Under Hafiz al-Asad, over 65,000 Syrians worked

⁵ Ministers are actually required to be Ba'th party members.

full-time as members of the security services, with hundreds of thousands supplementing their efforts as part-time workers. The regime's enormous commitment to surveillance of its citizens means that there is "one member of the intelligence service for every 153 adult citizens," one of the highest per capita concentrations of intelligence personnel in the world (24).

The stifling presence of the regime's eyes and ears only increased following Bashar al-Asad's acquisition of power in 2000. Four years after his father's death, Bashar had increased the number of those working in the army and intelligence from 530,000 in 1991 to over 700,000 (24).

Clearly, the regime places the utmost importance on the maintenance of current power structures. By virtually blanketing Syrian territory with high numbers of intelligence operatives, the regime ensures that it consistently has the upper hand in dealing with the opposition. Asad's extensive intelligence resources allow him to mark, track and destroy notable elements of the opposition in various stages of their development. This prior knowledge guarantees that the regime can quietly suppress dissidents on its own terms, destroying all but the most quickly organized and widespread protest movements.

4. Media Control

Independent of efforts to continuously monitor the Syrian people, regime officials also filter news information. Syrian state control over the media ensures that information released to the general public reflects positively on actions of the regime and minimizes or entirely omits news damaging to Asad's image. With few

exceptions, Syria's three official newspapers have maintained a monopoly on the dissemination of information to Syrians across the country since Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970.

During the short-lived opposition movement known as the Damascus Spring in 2000, the *al-Dumari* became the first privately owned and published newspaper to circulate within Syria in almost forty years (Lesch, "New Lion" 89).

Unfortunately, the relative freedom of speech allowed within the paper's contents was eventually labeled as threatening the stability of the regime, and the paper was shut down in 2003. Since the end of 2001, private publications must seek operational approval from the government, and are barred from writing pieces concerning "national security, national unity," and the "details of secret trials," among other sensitive topics. The Syrian regime even instituted penalties for reporting "falsehoods and fabricated reports," further discouraging the slightest dissent against regime policies (94).

The Syrian regime's monopolization of news is clear when examining recent press releases about Syrian protests from SANA, the state-official Syrian Arab News Agency. While the news agency does recognize the irrefutable existence of conflict within Syria, it normally identifies protesting citizens as foreign agents of the West or Israel and labels those killed in demonstrations as "armed terrorists." SANA never quotes the tens of thousands of Syrians peacefully demanding change from their government, opting instead to profile government efforts to maintain stability.

Until recently, the absence of global information networks guaranteed the Syrian government full control over its citizens' access to news reports. Because no

other sources were available, many Syrians relied on state networks for news. This made official Syrian news channels the primary vehicles for state propaganda. Currently, however, increased public access to Internet and global media sources has hampered the regime's ability to exercise its normal degree of control over Syrians, which undoubtedly contributed to the development of the local protest movement.

5. The Syrian-Iranian Relationship and Championship of the Palestinian Cause

International actors also play a large role in safeguarding Asad's control of the state. Iran is one such strategic ally. At first glance, differences between Iran and Syria make the notion of a strategic relationship between the two highly improbable. After all, Syria's government is declaredly secular, while Iran's is Islamic. Syria is Arab, while Iran is Persian. Syria is predominantly Sunni, while Iran is Shiite. Syria has even negotiated with Israel, while Islamic Iran has not. How, then, has a Syrian-Iranian relationship endured and flourished, enhancing both regimes' stability and overall regional influence?

Strong diplomatic relations between Syria and Iran can generally be attributed to both states' desire to enhance their regional influence. Of central concern to both states is the maintenance of certain strategic advantages over both Israel and Iraq, who have threatened the position of Syria and Iran in the Middle East for decades.

As early as 1979, Syrian officials identified distinct advantages in aligning with the Iranian theocratic regime, a government publicly hostile to Western

influence and the existence of Israel. Following Israel's strategic victory in the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords in 1979, Syria appealed to Iran for mutual support with the intent of placing additional pressure on Israel (Samii). Hafiz al-Asad was furious at the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, which had compromised crucial Arab leverage, and consequent Syrian power, against the Jewish state. Syria's immediate permission to establish an Iranian military base on Syria's western border won the regime sorely needed support to counter Israeli military superiority, while the Iranians gained an important flanking position against its Iraqi and Israeli adversaries (Samii).

By 1982, Iran was providing direct military support for its Syrian ally by aiding Lebanese fighters against Israel. For years, Lebanon "had been regarded as no more than a Syrian appendage that had to be fortified and securely controlled," based on the fact that any Israeli incursion into Lebanese territory was seen as an extension of Israel's northern front and a flanking maneuver against Syria (Ziadeh 82, Lesch, "New Lion" 46). During the conflict, Iran dispatched members of its Revolutionary Guard to aid in the fight against Israel, hoping to destroy or severely damage its American-backed enemy in the Middle East. Ultimately, however, Iran's leadership determined that the "Syrian appendage" should be able to defend itself, giving rise to support for the Lebanese militia group known as Hezbollah (Samii).

Both Iranian and Syrian support for Lebanese hostility to Israel continues to be directed through Hezbollah, with secret resupplies of money, weapons and military guidance (Talhamy). Positioned between Lebanon and Iran, Syria undoubtedly acts as an active transporter and mediator of transactions between

Iran and Hezbollah, serving as an “important interlocutor between Iran and its Hezbollah protégés” (“Syria: Background”). Although Syrian and Iranian officials avoid making overt remarks about relations with Hezbollah, the organization publicly credits both states for their critical support. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, noted that “the continuation of [the] Syrian position” of support is “the precondition to the continuation of the Palestinian cause,” the two central principles of which are Israel’s destruction and the establishment of a Palestinian state over all of the old mandate (Saad-Ghorayeb). The group even credited Iran as its central voice of guidance in the organization’s 1985 founding Open Letter, which stated that “we, the sons of Hezbollah’s nation, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which as the established nucleus of the world’s central Islamic state, abide by the orders of a single wise and just command currently embodied in the supreme Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Komeini” (Samii).

On a broader scale, the strategic relationship between Syria and Iran serves to undermine Israeli security on as many fronts as possible. Syria routinely acts as a logistics coordinator between Iranian financiers and radical Palestinian groups operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. For example, in January 2006, Bashar al-Asad hosted Iranian officials and representatives from Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and various other terrorist groups in Damascus for logistical meetings. A month later, Iran pledged \$50-100 million to support the operations of Hamas (Lawson).

As stated previously, the Syrian regime sustains its credibility in large measure through its anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian rhetoric and policy.⁶ Syrian citizens overwhelmingly support the state's foreign policy with regard to Israel; therefore, any Syrian-Iranian cooperation on the Israeli-Palestinian issue wins the regime instant praise. While Iranian support is key to Syria's balance of power with Israel, the real value of that support derives from its essentially unconditional nature. That is to say, Iran will back Assad whenever he is in trouble and without asking many questions. Combined with state control of the media, this support can yield highly effective and timely propaganda when the regime notices a rare surge in oppositional pressure.

In fact, this anti-Israel cooperation reflects, in part, both nations' desire to overcome weaknesses inherent in their minority sectarian identity. The Shiite Iranians, for example, attempt to escape sectarian isolation in the wider Muslim world by emphasizing Sunni-Shiite unity against Israel, the "Zionist enemy." By providing assistance to Syrian forces and militias that directly engage in violent confrontation with Israel, Iran positions itself as the chief agent and catalyst of this Muslim solidarity, thus potentially appealing to many Sunnis in a fashion otherwise inconceivable. Similarly, the ruling Alawis of Syria attempt to circumvent their sectarian isolation within the region in general and Syria in particular by stressing the same pan-Arab, pan-Muslim campaign against Israel. Just as the Syrian Alawi regime enhances its legitimacy through anti-Israel rhetoric, the Shiite Iranian

⁶ Recall that Bashar al-Asad legitimized decades of Syria's repressive emergency law by stating that it would exist as long as a lack of peace with Israel threatened the security of the state. But Israel, facing far more dangers, allowed open democracy to flourish.

government displays its credibility by standing shoulder to shoulder with Syria in the fight against an enemy in Israel. For this reason, Shiite Iran and Alawi Syria are natural allies, both striving to overcome their traditional marginalization.

Collaboration between Syria, Iran and their allied militant proxies has proven indispensable on multiple occasions. In 2005, for example, the Syrian regime appeared its weakest in years, following accusations from the UN about its complicity in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Opposition activists mobilized publicly for the first time in five years, boldly displaying their confidence in the vulnerabilities of the regime. Months later, Hezbollah's war with Israel shifted Lebanon's focus away from the regime's relative weakness, promoting instead an atmosphere of adulation and admiration. Hezbollah claimed victory over Israel, and its state financiers, Syria and Iran, were extolled throughout the Arab world for their essential logistical organization and support.

The Syrian regime's distraction tactic resurfaced six years later when the Arab Spring precipitated an outburst of indigenous protest activity. In May and June, approximately one thousand protestors congregated on Israel's Syrian and Lebanese borders for the first time in years, throwing rocks and rushing the border fence to commemorate both Israel's foundation and the start of the Six Day War in 1967. Interestingly, several newspapers reported that protestors claimed they were paid by Hezbollah or other actors to participate in the protests and receive highly-publicized treatment for any wounds suffered there. Radwan Ziadeh, a Syrian

activist in exile, bluntly stated, “There is no question the regime organized this to say to Israel and the West, ‘it’s us or chaos’” (Chulov 1).

Currently, Iran continues to aid the Baathists in their efforts to retain control, despite nationwide protests calling for the end of Bashar al-Asad’s rule. While dozens of countries have condemned the regime’s violent crackdown on protestors and many have demanded Asad’s resignation, Iran only warns that regional instability could accompany the regime’s collapse, shrouding official statements in vague language like Ahmanidejad’s calls for “needed reforms” in the Syrian government (Bozorgmehr). Furthermore, the Islamic Republic provides Asad with crucial lessons and materials to enforce riot control, Internet blockages and e-mail surveillance in the midst of ongoing Syrian protests (Entous). Rob Crilly of the *Daily Telegraph* even reported that the Revolutionary Guard was sending snipers to aid the regime’s forceful crackdown since August 2011 (Crilly).

Iran, which is 91 percent Shiite, persists in its isolated support of Asad because its officials know that any new popular government emerging in Syria would likely reflect the interests of the country’s overwhelming Sunni majority. International isolation of both states through sanctions increases Iranian incentives to protect the Syrian regime, which provides developing trade opportunities and friendly access to a proxy military organization in Hezbollah.

However, cooperation between the governments of Syria and Iran is not limited to actions concerning balance of power dynamics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Economic relations have slowly developed between these countries until today, when trade and investment collaboration are at unprecedented levels. Such

cooperation is necessary, precisely because international isolation and sanctions threaten to hamper both states' economic growth. In the 1980s, this cooperation was mainly limited to deals for discounted oil and military supplies (Talhamy). In only the past two years, the alliance has produced a new agreement on cooperation in over eight industries, the creation of a joint bank, and a \$10 billion natural gas agreement (Fulton).

Enhanced trade and investment cooperation in recent years aims to remedy one of the Syrian regime's most glaring weaknesses, namely, its economic incompetence and stagnation, themes that will be further addressed in the coming section. Ultimately, every new trade deal signed with Iran helps to weaken opposition charges that the state is ineffective and unresponsive to the needs of its citizens.

Regime Vulnerabilities

The second part of this section aims to highlight several basic regime characteristics that directly undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the Syrian government. Asad's preferential treatments of minority ethnic groups—the flipside, ironically of Alawite dominance—as well as his foreign and domestic policy failures, fuel Syria's growing protest movement. While most protestors remain fundamentally concerned with securing political freedoms, exposure of Asad's failures and neglect as a leader remain central to proving the current President's inability to guide a future Syrian state. Eventually, challenges to Asad's legitimacy may encourage foreign intervention, further army defections or changing citizen

allegiances that will propel the protest movement towards an increasingly violent civil war.

1. Minority Control of Senior Government Positions

Comprising a mere 12 percent of the Syrian population, the Alawi sect's control of the Syrian government's senior positions is, as noted, a source of cohesion and strength. Yet at the same time, this same Alawi control constitutes a fundamental weakness that the regime constantly attempts to mitigate. As stated previously, both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad were constantly forced to confront attacks on the regime's legitimacy. The Sunni majority's anger at "over-representation of minorities in the ranks of the Ba'th," as well as claims from well-respected opposition groups like the Syrian Brotherhood, who questioned the authenticity of Alawis as Muslims, threatened to compromise the Syrian people's trust in their government (Rabinovich, "View" 128).

Furthermore, the disproportionate representation of Alawis in senior government positions promoted neglect of government reforms aimed at appeasing citizens in other sects. Kurds, Christians, Druze and middle-class Sunnis are all underrepresented in the Syrian government, and pleas to address their greatest concerns were frequently ignored. For example, thousands of Kurdish citizens in Syria were denied citizenship by the regime for decades until 2011, when Asad began a frantic search for allies against an increasingly hostile protest movement. The regime's continued neglect of important sectarian groups, combined with its concurrent protection of Alawi interests, fostered growing dissatisfaction within

Syria's communities that ultimately exploded with the instigating spark of the Arab Spring.

However, the regime's sustained crackdown has made it increasingly clear that Syria's Alawites have no interest in endangering their hard-won socio-political status. Marginalized as a poor peasant class under the Syrian French Mandate, many Alawis saw their social, political and economic status virtually flip following Hafiz al-Asad's rise to power in 1971 (Mackey 1). While Syria's opposition continues to call for new and fair representation, Asad's Alawi inner circle will adamantly resist any challenge to the status quo, which provides the minority group unprecedented comforts and freedoms. Alawi fear of Sunni reprisals, and of a return to complete economic and political weakness, virtually guarantees the group will try to retain power no matter the cost.

2. Lack of Success with Israel

State failures in the realm of foreign policy also constitute potentially critical vulnerabilities. Since Syria lost a large portion of its border territory to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, neither Hafiz nor Bashar al-Asad have managed to negotiate the return of land known as the Golan Heights. Resting on Israel's northeast border, the Golan Heights hold immense importance for both states based on the fact that their control implies strategic military superiority and access to scarce water resources that flow into Israel's largest freshwater lake.

Peace talks with successive Israeli administrations over the past four decades have produced no agreement. Although the regime's abrasive dealings with

Israel are largely greeted with support by the Syrian public, the Asads' failure to reacquire one of Syria's central national goals displays a lack of foreign policy competence (Lesch, "New Lion" 29). While not among the opposition's most pressing grievances, Bashar al-Asad's foreign policy disappointments and failure to exert political leverage against Israel likely contribute to those reasons Syrians are currently demanding a change in leadership.

3. Syrian-Iranian Relations: A Shiite Conspiracy

The nature of official Syrian relationships with foreign nations also raises questions about the motives of Syria's Alawi regime. As stated previously, relations with Iran have provided Syria with economic and strategic benefits. However, some reputable elements within the opposition question the regime's decision to create a declaredly strategic alliance with the Iranians, claiming that the Islamic Republic seeks to export Shiite Islam to the greater Arab world.

Often cited as Syria's most popular opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood points to a secret 1998 letter allegedly published by the Iranian Sunni League as evidence of this plot. The letter outlines the following five ten-year steps recommended by Iran to institute complete Shiite overthrow of government control in Sunni Arab countries (Talhamy):

1. Iran improves diplomatic relations with Arab states through mutually beneficial economic, military and other agreements
2. Iranian agents infiltrate subject Arab states and gradually obtain the trust of citizens. These agents aid native Shiite brethren, begin to foster

discord between the government and established Sunni authorities, and slowly incorporate themselves into the army and bureaucratic administration.

3. Shiite religious leaders declare loyalty to the government, establishing trust.
4. Developing mistrust between Sunni leaders and government will lead to anarchy. Based on oaths of loyalty, Shiites will be seen as the only trusted individuals and will be promoted to key positions in government. These promotions will foment further Sunni anger and expulsions over violence.
5. Newly-established Shiite leaders will regain peace and take over the subject nation as Shiite leaders.

While it is unknown how widely shared or disseminated this view is within the general Syrian community, it remains significant because its endorser is regularly cited as the most powerful and most popular opposition group within Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood's public accusation against Shiite Iran reflects a cleavage within Syria regarding the state's foreign policy, whereby a notable portion of the public views the Syria-Iranian relationship as one-sided and disingenuously motivated. Stated mistrust of the Iranian government could help to fuel Syria's Sunni opposition, which already grounds its claims for regime change by questioning the legitimacy of Asad and his Alawi inner circle.

4. Syria's Struggling Economy and the Business Elite

Finally, the regime's inability to manage an effective state economy strongly suggests the regime's senior leadership is overwhelmed and generally incompetent. Similar to every other governable component of the state, Syria's economy is almost entirely regulated by the Asad regime. Industries ranging from oil production to finance, severely limited in their efficiency by the regime's bureaucratic red tape, struggle to compete in a global market that threatens to push a large portion of Syrians below the poverty line.

Under the socialist-nationalist regime of Hafiz al-Asad, officials nationalized basic enterprises in virtually every economic sector ("Syria-Overview"). Imports, exports, commercial and financial dealings were all regulated by a Syrian government that placed complex procedural restrictions on virtually every transaction. In the 1980s, Syria's inefficient state-controlled economy and foreign policy ventures, combined with several global factors, threatened to derail the state financial system:

"Years of drought in the early 1980s had effectively stymied agricultural growth. By the time production began to rebound in the mid-1980s, commodity prices for Syria's agricultural goods were dropping. Furthermore, the fledgling oil industry was retarded by the worldwide slump in petroleum prices and by Syria's own decision to cease pipeline transportation of Iraqi oil, thus surrendering lucrative transit fees. And perhaps most salient, the need to provision tens of thousands of troops stationed in Lebanon and to maintain strong defenses against Israel caused a crushing defense burden" ("Syria-Overview").

Despite Syria's economic woes, the regime found a way to manage its finances and suppress domestic calls for change. Shortly thereafter, Syria's participation in the 1991 Gulf War coalition won the regime billions of dollars in funding from Saudi Arabia and bailed Hafiz al-Asad out of dire financial straits

(Lesch, "New Lion" 55). For the time being, the regime could sustain its economic policies regardless of economic stagnation.

Following his father's death in 2000, Bashar al-Asad recognized that state control over the Syrian economy was suffocating much-needed growth. Unfortunately for the young Asad, many of the Ba'th party leadership at the turn of the century were old, lacked academic training, and regularly expressed "negative views of the projects introduced during the first two years of Bashar's rule [...] particularly regarding private universities, private banks and other economic innovations" (Ziadeh 49). It took until the closing of the tenth Ba'th party conference in 2005 for Bashar to appoint new, qualified economic advisors and to begin economic reform with the creation of Syria's first private banks, insurance agencies and stock market (52).

An evaluation of Syria's current economic structure, however, shows that the reforms instituted by Asad in 2005 were merely cosmetic. Regime control of Syria's industries remains the norm, as evidenced by International Monetary Fund claims that Syria continues to have "the worst array of state instituted controls of any country in the Mediterranean" (Plaut). Not only does the government regulate business transactions, it does so at an alarmingly inefficient rate; the World Bank currently ranks Syria 144 out of 183 countries on their Ease of Business Report (Fielding-Smith). Essentially, efficiency-sapping controls continue to hold the Syrian economy in stagnation, discouraging substantial foreign investment and threatening to increase the state's already dangerous levels of unemployment and budget deficit.

Furthermore, the regime's mutually profitable relationships with inner-circle businessmen deepen an already enormous income divide that has pushed growing numbers of Syrians below the poverty line. As early as the 1970s, Alawi military officers formed friendships with influential Sunni businessmen, offering them insider privileges exclusive to members of the regime in exchange for business deals (Shadid, "In Syria"). These relationships did not change following the post-2000 transition of power; some argue they were even enhanced. For example, Rami Makhlouf, cousin and friend of Bashar al-Asad, is thought to control over 50 percent of the Syrian economy through exclusive cell phone and other contracts.

Many Syrians see this special treatment as yet another indication that the regime cares more about satisfying its inner circle than the general population. Recently, Syrians have continued to question insider relationships, accusing Makhlouf, Asad and others of "robbing the people" (Shadid, "In Syria"). In reality, these accusations are generally well-founded; the Legatum Prosperity Index ranked Syria among the lowest countries in the world for local, citizen-reported rates of employment ("Economy").

Suspect partnerships between the Syrian regime and business elites raised immediate, enduring doubts among the Syrian public regarding the Asads' ability to represent accurately the interests of Syria's general population. Thus, the Alawi regime was forced to expend an enormous amount of time and resources to secure its fragile position. In 2005, Syria spent more than 6 percent of its GDP on defense, the tenth-highest allocation of any country in the world ("Defense," "CIA: Military Expenditures"). While neighboring states like Israel display consistent economic

growth despite even higher defense allocations, Syria's elevated military expenditures undoubtedly contributed to the state's declining economy.

Combined with unemployment, poor education and endemic government inefficiency, high expenditures on military and intelligence branches intended to stabilize Alawi control further exacerbated Syria's domestic economic woes. This runs the obvious risk of both antagonizing the public and starving the government itself of funds. Essentially, the regime's lofty military spending and consequent budget shortfalls created an incessant cycle of increasing citizen mistrust and government surveillance. These two factors foster tension between the regime and Syria's communities and serve as a potential source of destabilization.

Asad's patrimonial proclivities, combined with Syria's poorly performing economy, place enormous pressure on the regime to make lasting economic changes that will improve the lives of Syrians. While Asad can legitimize most actions of the regime through state-controlled media or charged public rhetoric, the regime cannot mask the realities of economic hardship that the average Syrian manages on a regular basis. Every day the regime fails to institute appropriate economic policy provides the opposition with concrete, credible incentives to resist and question their government.

Chapter 2: Regime Opposition in Syria: A History

This section intends to map the birth and development of opposition movements within Ba'athist-run Syria, as well as their general interaction with elements of the regime. Beginning with the first major opposition movement in 1982, I will track demands for political change and the regime's response to opposition actions. Historical examination of opposition activity is of absolute importance when making inferences about Syria's future.

A Rule of Three Decades

Since the Ba'th party seized power under Hafiz al-Asad in 1971, the Syrian regime has forcibly managed popular opposition based on ethnic and religious tension and the suppression of individual political expression. The following historical evaluation of opposition movements will shed light on the difficulties Syrians in revolt will face in the future, as well as their prospects for success. Although state control of information makes it difficult to trace the historical origins and development of each specific opposition movement, I shall attempt to identify the central groups, their principal periods and spheres of activity.

Before Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, the sole opposition movement that gained momentum during Hafiz's 30-year rule drew largely from disagreement over the regime's religious affiliation. As already noted, both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad are Alawis, who make up a mere 12 percent of the Syrian population, compared to an overwhelming 74 percent Sunni majority.

Islamist groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood both question the legitimacy of Alawis as true Muslims and reject the notion supported by the secular nationalist Ba'th government that religion be separated from politics. This grievance, coupled with the fact that the Syrian constitution stipulates the President must be Muslim, remains a central source of conflict between the regime and the population to this day (Rabinovich, "View" 115).

In 1979, Sunni conflict with their secular minority government came to a head when members of the Muslim Brotherhood killed over thirty Alawi military cadets at a school in Aleppo (Rubin, "Truth" 58). Immediately, the Syrian regime arrested members of the Brotherhood and enacted Law 49 the following year, which stated that "each and every one belonging to the Moslem Brethren Group organization is considered a criminal who will receive a death punishment" ("Special").⁷ In 1982, after Islamists continued acting out against the secular regime, Hafiz al-Asad took measures to ensure that the uprising was crushed, dispatching the military to the town of Hama, where some 10,000-40,000 Syrians were killed and the city virtually destroyed (Rubin, "Truth" 58). After just over ten years in power, Asad clearly displayed that any threat to the stability of the regime would be answered with overwhelming, relentless force.

Unlike any other legislation or decree, Law 49 decimated the ranks of Syria's then-leading opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood. Members forced into exile or inactivity lost their crucial local connections, stripping the entire group of its

⁷ Law 49 continued to be enforced for the next thirty years and was only recently lifted following the immense pressure placed on the Syrian regime during 2011 protests.

operational effectiveness. Although the Muslim Brotherhood officially continued to communicate with Syrians from abroad, its members no longer posed a significant threat to the regime. Indeed, the Brotherhood's stated problems in communicating with and recruiting supporters in the early stages of 2011 protests can be widely attributed to the organization's 30 years of operation-in-exile (Ulutas 95).

The remainder of the 1980s and 1990s saw a complete absence of major public opposition activity within Syria, as well as a consolidation of power within the Ba'th regime. As noted, Syria's participation in the Gulf War coalition won the government billions of dollars in aid from Saudi Arabia, which greatly lessened economic strain on the country's struggling economy and made possible the "reposition[ing of] Syria in the region both economically and politically" (Lesch, "New Lion" 55). At a time when oil prices were falling, Soviet aid was sharply declining, state debt was increasing, and regional drought was sapping Syria of crucial agricultural production, Saudi Arabian aid effectively resuscitated a regime on the brink of economic collapse. Additionally, Syria's low-cost commitment to the Gulf War resulted in decreased pressure from the United States regarding the regime's routine human rights abuses and export of terrorism (103, 180).

Asad further strengthened the regime's hold on the country by becoming an active contributor to peace talks with Israel. Syria's participation in the Madrid peace conference, along with a series of direct negotiations with US mediation throughout the 1990s, won Syria international praise for its newfound commitment to dialogue (Lesch, "Missed" 324). Essentially, the regime simultaneously bolstered its international legitimacy and used new developments in foreign affairs to garner

domestic support that successfully shifted the focus away from repression at home. As Lesch explains, “it was the regime’s goal to save itself by avoiding any change at home [...] foreign policy, as would happen so often before and after, was a substitute for better performance in the actual governance of Syria” (Rubin, “Truth” 102).

The Rule of an Heir and Regime Survival

The Alawi regime’s hold on key components of power continued well past Hafiz al-Asad’s death at the turn of the millennium. As previously noted, 90 percent of generals in the military were Alawis when power transitioned smoothly to Bashar al-Asad in 2000. Additionally, close Alawi cousins of Asad took control of the Presidential Guard, key special forces units, and intelligence operations responsible for monitoring members of the regime (52). Although Bashar replaced the majority of his senior staff, Ba’th party Alawis maintained control of the most important positions in both the political and military sectors, ensuring that the transfer of power to Syria’s new, young leader would not be marked by any significant changes in the regime’s structure.

However, the young Asad’s ascendancy to power offered a rare glimpse of hope to the Syrian opposition. Bashar’s inaugural address in 2000, for example, pointed to the need for administrative and democratic reform, stressing the importance of constructive dialogue and “creative thinking” (Ziadeh 62, Landis and Pace 51). While it is true that such discourse continues to be proffered to Syrians without significant change, many within Syria saw Asad as a reformer capable and willing to change an outdated form of restricted government.

Based on these beliefs, groups of Syrian intellectuals, activists and prominent figures began to expand formerly private discussions to the public realm for the first time since the late 1970s (Landis and Pace 48). Two months after Asad's inauguration, a group of activists issued the "Communiqué of the 99 Intellectuals," which called for increased political reform and the elimination of notoriously repressive laws (Law 49 was among them). Interestingly, the regime reacted positively to calls for change, releasing over 600 political prisoners (Ziadeh 63-4). Soon after, individuals within the Syrian opposition were able to organize and issue a "Manifesto of 1,000" which expanded on the Communiqué by demanding further political reforms, political pluralism and women's rights backed by a thousand signatures.

Ultimately, though, the spread of democratic forums and creation of civil society groups began significantly to threaten the regime, and crackdowns ensued. First, forums were required to provide the names of their participants and meeting papers for government approval. Within a year of the Communiqué, most democratic forums suspended their activities, and the leading activists within several pro-democracy groups were arrested for "weakening patriotic spirit and spreading false news" (68-70, Ulutas 91). The short Damascus Spring had come to an end.

The Damascus Spring in Retrospect: The Emergence of a New Opposition

Although the Syrian pro-democracy movement of 2000 was crushed within a year, its development offers a rare view into the new Syrian opposition. While the

Muslim Brotherhood's 1982 uprising was largely orchestrated by a singular group dissatisfied with the regime's religious affiliation, the Damascus Spring saw the rise and partial unification of several clusters within the country. Numerous groups supporting democratic dialogue were created, undivided in their calls for general democratic and regime reform. In a state where dissenters are routinely arrested, jailed or killed, the outpouring of support for democratic reform truly showed the intense desire for change among significant sectors of the Syrian population. The fact that several democratic forums expanded to threatening levels in less than a year absent any incendiary regime action is a clear indication of changing sensibilities.

While the Damascus Spring marked the first time the regime faced public criticism in decades, it is important to note the sources of this criticism (Ulutas 90). Both manifestos of the Damascus Spring were authored by groups of individuals, most of whom were secular, university-educated figureheads in exile. Public political forums, unprecedented yet popular in 2000, were attended only by individuals, rather than by established blocs or parties. At no point during the Damascus Spring did designated representatives of Syrian ethnic or oppositional groups sign subject manifestos or make public declarations of support in forums. Essentially, published statements, which "had the function of conveying the oppositions' message to the world, "[fell] short [of] creating a well-organized political body with a clear agenda" (94).

Finally, changes in the political platform of the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood created huge implications for the group's participation in future

opposition activity. In May 2001, the Brotherhood issued a pact supporting democratic dialogue and renounced violence as an acceptable strategy to achieve its goals (69). This adjustment, which effectively aligned the Muslim Brotherhood with leading figures of the secular opposition, marked the first time that the exiled Brotherhood allied with a broader opposition seeking democratic reform. Joined with other sectarian elements, the re-emerging Muslim Brotherhood would become a “chief vehicle for transmitting the grievances of the large and diffuse Sunni community” in protest movements to come (Rubin, “Muslim” 135).

2005: Repression, Declaration, and Defection

With the exception of one major incident, opposition figures were almost entirely silenced from the period immediately following the end of the Damascus Spring until the months preceding the issuance of the Damascus Declaration in October 2005. During that incident, thousands of Kurdish protestors were arrested for demonstrating against Syrian security personnels’ use of force in the killing of several Kurds at a 2004 soccer match (Landis and Pace 53). Otherwise, the regime quashed open expressions of dissent through its usual tactics of intimidation and arbitrary arrests. Beginning in March 2005, the Syrian regime took action to isolate a Syrian opposition in exile by banning opposition meetings, arresting committee members of democratic forums and closing radio stations covering small protests (57-60).

During this time, the Syrian regime faced a series of foreign policy setbacks that gravely threatened its legitimacy. Following the issuance of a UN report which

concluded Syria had to have been involved in the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, as well as Syria's precipitous withdrawal from Lebanon that April, the general atmosphere in Damascus favored a rare outburst of citizen dissent (UN "Resolution," Lesch "Opportunities" 331). Suddenly, opposition groups within Syria became emboldened by the regime's apparent weakness. Within months, leading individuals organized a new national dialogue in anticipation of a government transition, which in October 2005 produced the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change.

Publication of the Damascus Declaration marked the first time that representatives for all of Syria's major citizen groups united behind a single, clearly stated platform. Over 250 leading opposition figures and 5 parties representing Kurds, Arabs, Socialists, Communists, secular and religious alike built on connections established during the Damascus Spring five years earlier to produce this powerful written protest (Landis and Pace, Ulutas 91). Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood's successful alliance with secular Syrian groups in the Declaration constituted a new and enormous threat to the regime. Silenced for over twenty years under Law 49, the exiled Muslim Brotherhood began to reinvigorate communications with Syrian supporters, while secular groups obtained newfound support from what is often cited as Syria's most powerful Islamist group (56).

The Muslim Brotherhood, which previously served as Syria's most popular opposition group, likely signed the Damascus Declaration because of the future opportunities alliance-building could provide the newly reactivated organization. Pro-Islamist provisions included in the Declaration ensured the Brotherhood's

central interests were protected, while newly established contacts with other opposition groups increased the likelihood the Brotherhood could have a credible and significant role in any future opposition coalition.

Additionally, new alliances created between Syrian Kurds and Arab groups under the Declaration constituted an unprecedented potential threat to the Asad regime. As Ulutas states, Kurdish and Arab populations historically lived in mutual mistrust. Syria's "Arab nationalist indoctrination," operating in direct conflict with "small Kurdish groups aspiring for political autonomy [...or] a greater Kurdistan," threatened to separate both populations for decades (Ulutas 97). Essentially, Kurdish support for the Damascus Declaration aligned the group with the shared interests of Syrian Arabs and served as the first step to reduce their traditional divide.

Unfortunately, the opposition never went beyond this abstract realization that the country's various ethnic and religious groups had to be unified if they were to challenge the regime. True, the Damascus Declaration successfully codified the general demands of the Syrian public under one umbrella statement. However, individual leaders failed to take concrete steps beyond the enunciation of pious demands. Widespread protests associated with the Declaration, likely necessary to produce positive change within the regime, never materialized. Ultimately, the Declaration failed to create or even promote substantive change, contenting itself with principled statements.

This failure may have stemmed from the fact that Syria's opposition still lacked the political and administrative organization needed for effective protest.

Although signatories of the Declaration represented almost all of Syria's demographic groups, the oppositions' continued emphasis on individuals as a source of dissent minimized the impact opposition groups could ultimately have. In contrast to current protests that rely on the power of sheer numbers and on the ultimate threat of armed insurrection to demand change, Syria's former opposition relied too heavily on the reputations of individuals from the outset of Bashar al-Asad's rule.

Signatories of the Declaration called for "change that lifts the country out of the mold of the security state and takes it to the mold of the political state" (Landis, "Declaration"). They then listed a series of agreed-upon principles to guide the future leadership of the country in creating a new governmental system based on political pluralism, equal representation and various democratic freedoms.

A few specific components of the Declaration are useful in pinpointing the opposition's developing vision for a new Syrian state. After all, many of Syria's current protest leaders and reformers were probably engaged in the Declaration process six years ago. First, one must note the importance that the opposition placed on religion and Syrian identity. The Declaration stated that "Islam -- which is the religion and ideology of the majority [...] is the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people. Our Arab civilization has been formed within the framework of its ideas [...]" (Landis). By making this strong statement, the opposition asserted that any future government, while respecting all religious groups, should be based on the fundamental concepts of Islam. This position is especially relevant considering that the regime self-identifies as secular

and is led by an Alawite, whose legitimacy is often questioned by Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Declaration also showed that opposition leaders were committed to a unique form of democracy free of substantial outside influence. The signatories stated that change should be based on certain premises, including “rejection of the change that is brought from abroad” (Landis). This statement, along with the portion reaffirming the importance of Islam in the state, was greeted with wide support from Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, who see the Syrian regime as straying not only from fair government, but from the inherent Muslim nature of the Arab state.

Syrian criticisms of the Declaration reinforced the notion that the opposition remained deeply divided, despite their success in signing a single document representing the interests of the nation’s various ethnic and religious groups. For example, the previously mentioned clause referring to the centrality of Islam drew disparagement from secular and Christian Syrians. Similarly, a short clause acknowledging the legitimacy of Kurdish claims was dismissed by some Kurdish groups, on grounds that it did not contain sufficiently specific demands about Kurdish rights (56). Ultimately, however, the Damascus Declaration represented a clear advance toward the unification of Syria’s diverse population and provided insight into the oppositions’ view of the future, even though certain groups felt it did not adequately express their interests.

Almost immediately after the Declaration’s publication, the regime suffered an even greater setback. In December, Vice President Abdul Khaddam defected to

the opposition, declaring his partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood and announcing the formation of a new oppositional alliance designated as the National Salvation Front (58). At a time when the opposition was in a fledgling state of organization, Khaddam provided essential funding, connections and knowledge of the regime's intimate operations to help ensure its survival.⁸

Predictably, Asad reacted with accusations that the Syrian opposition sought to undermine the stability of the nation and distract attention from the real issues, which he stated were the wrongdoings of the United States and Israel. Three months after Khaddam's defection, Asad outlawed contact with exiled dissidents and prohibited flagged Syrians from leaving the country (60).

Lebanon's War of 2006: A Win for the Regime

Immediately preceding Israel's 2006 war with Lebanon, Asad was in trouble. Opposition activity the previous year escalated to its highest level in years, and the regime lost an important insider to dissidents in Vice President Khaddam. At the same time, Syria faced mounting international pressure from the West and international organizations. Continuing American sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act continued to stifle the Syrian economy, while UN Resolutions 1636 and 1680 respectively implicated Syria in the assassination of Hariri and recommended that the country make final delineations on its Lebanese border ("Implementation," UN "Encourages," UN "Resolution").

⁸ Following years of inactivity, the National Salvation Front revived in early 2011 after years of inactivity. Attempting to organize demonstrations in exile, the NSF quickly ceded managerial power to more prepared local protest organizations. Its representatives are no longer substantial participants in the protest movement.

Despite or because of Syrian withdrawal the previous year, Lebanese stability remained a central security concern of the Asad regime. From the rise of Hafiz al-Asad until 2006, Lebanon, as noted, had been regarded as no more than a Syrian appendage that had to be fortified and securely controlled. Consequently, Hezbollah's role as the central fighting force in the 2006 conflict won the group essential support from the Syrian regime. Although many more Hezbollah fighters were killed than Israeli soldiers, the group ultimately survived and declared victory in the war (Landis and Pace 64).

Syria's backing of Hezbollah throughout the war greatly boosted the regime's regional and domestic legitimacy, as well as its credibility among radical Islamist groups (Rubin, "Truth" 6). Despite domestic repressions, Syria's general public is widely believed to share the regime's animosity towards Israel. Asad's combative approach to relations with Syria's Jewish neighbor state are widely supported by regular Syrians, who favor reducing the relative strength of Israel and limiting its perceived oppression of the Palestinian people (Landis and Pace 62). The regime's backing of Israel's adversary in the 2006 war effectively distracted the Syrian public from their domestic concerns and re-established Asad as a capable leader who represented the true interests of regular Syrians across the country.

This proved damaging to the progress of the Syrian opposition, which had gained substantial momentum with the publication of the Damascus Declaration and Khaddam's subsequent defection. Asad now gained immense support and recognition in the Arab world as the symbolic leader of nations willing to stand firm and confront the Zionist enemy. As Lesch explains, Syria's "nationalist credentials

were intact because it served as the cradle of modern Arab nationalism and because it has not signed a peace treaty with Israel. [...because of] its support of Hezbollah, it can legitimately adopt, at least rhetorically, a radical position vis-à-vis Israel when it is advantageous in the Arab world to do so” (Lesch, “Missed” 326). While the regime’s domestic policy of repression remained unchanged, calls from the opposition were temporarily drowned out by praise for Asad’s bold defense of Lebanon.

Post-Lebanon: The Regime Stranglehold

Bolstered by a perceived victory in Lebanon, Asad tightened his grip on power and successfully stifled the growth of any major opposition activity for several years. Although Vice President Khaddam’s defection damaged the regime’s legitimacy, his exile severely limited his ability to organize and communicate with key opposition figures. Syrian intelligence officials capitalized on Khaddam’s physical isolation, monitoring communications within the country to ensure the leader-in-exile did not establish or develop connections with the opposition in Syria.

Available evidence suggests that the regime’s overwhelming intelligence and security apparatus intimidated Syrians into silence for the next five years. Ultimately, only the unprecedented Arab Spring protest movement was able to induce a fearful Syrian population to mobilize en masse against their repressive government.

Shifting Alliances: Syria's Opposition Before 2011

Previous analysis of opposition activity in 1982, 2000, and 2005 shows the constantly shifting, fragmented nature of Syria's opposition movement. From the early 1980s until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, Syrians resistant to the Asad regime have undergone a continuous cycle of grouping, realignment and alliance building.

The ceaseless restructuring of Syria's opposition is important for two reasons. First, it shows that throughout its history, the opposition has never represented the demands of a monolithic, unified bloc. Shifting alliances between political factions attempt to bridge the very same gaps in fundamental interest that separate Syria's Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Alawis and other groups in the first place. Any successful opposition movement must include recognized representatives of all these groups, not merely one or two of them. Second, opposition restructuring displays the dysfunctional nature of the movement absent formal leadership structure. While individuals achieved notable symbolic victories in the publishing of reform documents like the Damascus Declaration, the lack of an elected organizational body prevented the mass mobilization of Syria's general public until the encouraging development of the Arab Spring in 2011. This type of mobilization is probably the only effective way to wring concessions from regimes similar to Asad's.

Chapter 3:

Syria's Arab Spring: The 2011-12 Protest Movement

In January 2011, Syrian citizens emboldened by neighboring protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia began public demonstrations against Asad's government. Initially calling for democratic reforms within the regime, protestors in many Syrian cities altered their demands as Asad reacted with increasing and disproportionate violence. Ten months later, many Syrians had united under an increasingly well-defined opposition movement to demand the complete removal of the Asad regime and the institution of a democratically elected popular government.

This section will trace the development of Syria's Arab Spring on the presumption that an analysis of current events, as well as previously included historical analysis, will provide the most comprehensive basis for predicting Syria's political future. The actions of Syria's increasingly organized opposition, of the regime, and of the international community will be evaluated to predict, however tentatively and provisionally, the outcome of the Syrian protest movement. I will argue that based on the historical interaction of Syria's interest groups and the refusal of the regime to institute a peaceful solution, civil war is most likely to occur.

Because this section deals with accounts of current events, it is important to note that the Syrian government severely restricts the ability of journalists to operate within the country. Dates of protest movements, estimates of their size, and casualty figures are not independently verified but are generally accepted, based on the reputation of Syrian human rights groups and of opposition figures who report

them. Unfortunately, information regarding the suppressive tactics of the regime specific to each protest is largely unavailable due to the regime's stranglehold on media reporting.

Tracing the Movement: Protest Timeline

Sporadic protests against the Asad regime began in January 2011.

Disorganized and relatively small, these protests were easily quashed by Syria's police and intelligence personnel, who beat and arrested demonstrators before they could organize into a larger force of hundreds. That same month, President Bashar al-Asad vocalized the regime's confidence that the spirit of dissent associated with the Arab Spring would not spread to Syria. In a January speech, Asad claimed Syria was immune of protests because the Syrian public was "like-minded on core issues, especially the need to support the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance against Israel and to maintain a reserved attitude towards the US" (Maddy-Weitzman 23).

Unfortunately for Asad, this "like-mindedness" failed to materialize as massive protest movements began in early March. On March 25, over 100,000 Syrians marched in peaceful protest in the city of Daraa. That same month, similar protests spread to other Syrian cities and towns including Homs, Hama, Baniyas, Aleppo, Latakia and the suburbs of Damascus, which are displayed on the map on the following page.



("Syria Map")

As protests spread throughout the country and increased in magnitude, the Assad regime reacted with direct violence. During the March 25 protest, Syrian security forces killed over 20 protestors, indiscriminately firing into crowds to terrify and disperse civilians. This type of use of weapons has become a routine reaction of Assad's security personnel, who have killed upwards of 100 protestors in a single protest event and contributed to the 6,000+ civilian casualties the U.N. estimates Syrian conflict has produced.

In late March, the Syrian regime offered its first acknowledgement of protest demands with Assad's announcement that the emergency rule of Law 49 would be lifted, and that a new government would be formed. Sadly, these measures were purely cosmetic and intended to deflect growing international criticism. First, the elimination of emergency law in April did not affect the regime's brutal crackdown on citizens. Demonstrators and civilians were still subject to indiscriminate shooting, arrest and detention. Second, Syria's "new" government did not alter the regime's power structure. While new officials were appointed to Syria's official government, Assad's position as President and commander-in-chief remained

unchanged. Asad continued to exert limitless power granted under the Syrian constitution to supervise state activity and the suppression of protests.

April and May followed a similar pattern. Increasingly large, frequent and widespread protests were met with violence by the regime, which regularly attributed civilian deaths to non-state terrorist activity. According to various media sources, several days of protest in April resulted in daily civilian casualties of 30 or more, bringing an unofficial count of the single month's death toll to hundreds.

Who Organized The Protests?

Daily protests in the spring and summer of 2011 were organized and executed by small groups of Syrians known as the Local Coordination Committees of Syria. Operating independently in hotbed cities, approximately fourteen Local Coordination Committees serve as the public's anonymous leadership, directing unique forms of community protest through smuggled cellular phones, computers and other communication electronics (Shadid "Coalition"). According to the groups' web site, the Local Coordination Committees "have sought greater coordination between themselves in order to synchronize their activities, movements on the ground and political positions" with the stated goal of regime removal and a peaceful transition of power ("About" 1).

Committee members, who remain anonymous for obvious reasons, communicate daily with one another through Internet chat rooms that enable them to organize protests and acts of civil disobedience. For example, in one Damascus suburb, the local coordination committee encouraged residents to ignore phone,

electricity and water bills in an effort to disrupt the stability of government operations. (Shadid “Coalition”).

Altogether, the committees boasted an expanding 100-200 staff members who continue to organize demonstrations, document their outcomes and attempt to communicate information with foreign media sources (Shadid “Coalition”). As Shadid states, the vast majority of Committee members were young Syrians. This extremely important remark emphasizes the changing structure of Syria’s opposition. Older opposition figures, such as those affiliated with the 2000 Damascus Spring, are gradually being replaced or eclipsed by savvy Syrian youth capable of exploiting new communication technologies to advance and publicize the protest movement. While the detailed membership of Syria’s opposition is unknown, it is safe to assume that many of today’s central activists are young, cosmopolitan amateurs completely disaffiliated with the leading protest figures of 2000 and 2005. In fact, until the Committees joined Syria’s largest opposition coalition in September 2011, their activities were entirely disconnected from earlier attempts at political organization and unification. Essentially, leaders of the Coordination Committees are interested in ensuring that popular protests survive and thrive, thus maintaining pressure on the regime to step down.

April-June: The Opposition Organizes from Abroad

On April 26, representatives of Islamists, Kurds, liberals, Christians, and independents met in Turkey to criticize Asad and issue the protest movement’s first unified statement. Interestingly, the group’s final manifesto did not demand Asad

step down. Rather, it called for an end to violence, recognition of Syrian demands, and a “transition to a multi-party system [based on] a new constitution and early elections” (Ulutas 91).

One month later, Syrian opposition groups pushed for more comprehensive unification at the May 31-June 3 Syria Conference for Change, which was also held in Turkey. At this meeting, representatives of Syria’s diverse communities elected a 31-member council responsible for coordinating activities related to the “Syrian revolution.” Furthermore, members made official demands for Asad’s resignation for the first time (92).

While these meetings produced important declarations and an elected organizational body, neither conference made a truly substantial contribution to the protest movement or delegitimization of the Asad regime. First, these elected representatives were not spokespeople for the revolution as it was developing on the ground, nor were they particularly well-connected with Syria’s chief political activists. As stated previously, members of the Local Coordination Committees were successfully orchestrating the same kind of activity that the conference’s elected council was created to supervise. Second, many of the meetings’ attendees were Syrians in exile, unable to communicate effectively with protestors or merely out of touch with Syria’s new reality.

Clearly, the two main groups responsible for organized political dissent in the spring of 2011 were wholly disconnected. Syria’s Local Coordination Committees managed citizens in protest hotspots, while representatives at opposition conferences issued manifestos and elected consultative bodies from

abroad. One group was critically concerned with the survival and advancement of popular protest, while the other was focused on the politics of organization and association. Ultimately, it would take a much more concerted effort to link effectively Syria's political hopefuls in exile with the young individuals responsible for local protest management on the streets of the country.

One week before opposition figures met in Turkey, the international community took decisive action to warn the regime that its violent reaction to dissent was unacceptable. On May 23, the European Union placed sanctions on President Asad and nine of his close senior associates, freezing their assets and banning travel to Union member countries ("Syria's Assad"). Predictably, the EU's warning did little to affect the regime's treatment of citizen protest. Violence raged throughout the summer months, as the Syrian army besieged a number of towns in a continued attempt to subdue large protests. Opposition groups and media outlets reported dozens of civilian deaths every few days, with more than 80 killed on a single day in July ("Syria News").

On June 20, Asad praised "security forces and all those who have been working to insure the prevention of sedition," vowing that the government would continue to target and eliminate "outlaws and [those] wanted for various criminal cases who found in the state's institutions an enemy because they constitute an obstacle for their illegitimate interests" (Al-Assad "Damascus"). Asad continued to defend his actions throughout the speech, citing the government's proactive assembly of committees and removal of discriminatory laws as evidence of sufficient and extensive reform.

The Free Syrian Army

As Syria's civilian death toll climbed into the thousands, small pockets of army defectors who refused to shoot protestors began to mass and prepare violent resistance against Assad. On July 29, Colonel Riyad al-Asad and several associates announced the formation of the first organized armed resistance group, known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), through a video message. In his first speech, Col. Asad pledged FSA soldiers aim "to work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity to bring this regime down, protect the revolution, and stand in the face of the irresponsible military machine that protects the regime" (Zambelis 1).

Based in cross-border safe houses and refugee camps, the FSA slowly emerged as both a viable threat to Assad's loyal military and Syria's third well-established opposition element. As early as October, FSA units reportedly engaged routinely with regime military units, adding handfuls of military defectors to its ranks with each encounter. Senior FSA commanders recently claimed the group boasts over 20,000 soldiers, while western intelligence officials conservatively estimate the FSA's strength at over 10,000 (2).

The FSA's sporadic success at recruiting defectors may stem from the Syrian army's sectarian divide, previously discussed under the "Strengths and Weaknesses" section. According to some reports, the FSA's "low ranking conscripts and officers of the Sunni Arab majority" prioritize Alawi officers as military targets (Zambelis). Unverified reports contend that in skirmishes, FSA soldiers attempt to kill Assad's Alawi officers before encouraging fellow Sunnis to join the FSA rank-and-file.

Recently, however, tensions have risen within the FSA's senior leadership following the January defection of a top military official, Brigadier General Mustafa Ahmed al-Sheikh. Al-Sheikh, who joined the FSA months after the lower-ranked Col. Riyadh al-Assad had assumed control of its forces, immediately challenged the established leader, calling for a supreme military council to coordinate all operations with himself as head (Bar'el 1). Unconfirmed reports state that al-Sheikh may already control a group of loyal forces, suggesting that the FSA may split into two separate militias in the future. Clearly, a potential split in rebel forces has enormous implications for both the likelihood of regime overthrow and the transfer of immediate power, should such a vacuum be created.

Regardless of their tactics or internal divisions, the Syrian oppositions' armed wing could threaten a regime that itself relies ultimately on violence. As will be shown in the following section, the FSA in recent months has become an increasingly credible actor.

International Response and the New Opposition Coalition: Fall of 2011

In August, key members of the international community increased pressure on the Asad regime. On August 7 and 8, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait removed their ambassadors from Syria in protest ("Syria News"). Later that month, the United States, Britain, France and Germany all called on Asad to leave office, while President Obama signed an executive sanction order designed to cripple Syria's economy by limiting foreign investment and banning oil importation (Nicholas 1).

The European Union followed suit weeks later with a similar ban on Syrian oil imposed September 2 (“Syria-News”).

Despite unprecedented diplomatic and economic isolation, the Syrian regime remained steadfast in its desire to retain power. While defectors continued to join the FSA, the Alawi senior command of Asad’s military largely remained loyal and maintained discipline within the Syrian army’s ranks. Crackdown on protests persisted through the fall months, with military units training indiscriminate fire from tanks, snipers and other soldiers on unarmed protestors in a continued attempt to disrupt anti-government activity.

In September, activists announced efforts to create yet another organized opposition body. The Syrian National Council (SNC) aspired to serve as a wholly representative transitional body capable of communicating with the international community and orchestrating regime change. A translation of the group’s website states that the Council aims to “deliver the message of the Syrian people in the field of international diplomacy with the aim to overthrow the regime, its figureheads, and the pillars on which it stands in order to establish a democratic, multi-party and civil state” (“Syrian National”).

Interestingly, the SNC publicly declared it did not desire recognition as the transitional government, opting to represent only the revolutionary movement (“Syrian Council”). According to the Council’s background statement, the group seeks “to ensure there is no political vacuum” by “develop[ing] a roadmap for democratic change in Syria” (“Syrian National”). Despite the physical absence of such a roadmap to date, several state governments have acknowledged the SNC as

the central envoy of Syrian revolutionaries. The SNC is recognized by 6 UN member states, and Secretary of State Clinton recently labeled the group as the “leading and legitimate representative of Syrians seeking a peaceful transition” (DeYoung 1).

Comprised of a 190-member General Assembly and 29-member Secretariat, the SNC slowly developed into Syria’s leading opposition group based on support received by notable groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, some Kurdish groups, the Local Coordination Committees, and those who issued the Damascus Declaration in 2005 (“Syrian Council”). The SNC is also directly linked to the Free Syrian Army. These alliances united Syria’s three primary opposition groups into one nominal coalition complete with a standing army and formal organizational structure.

However, it is important to note that the SNC and FSA are two organizationally distinct entities with differing leadership and command structures. While the SNC recently “pledge[d] to support” the FSA, operatives within the rebel army frequently execute operations independent of SNC supervision or recommendations. In fact, early relations between the two parties even appeared competitive, with the SNC attempting to advise the frequency and location of FSA activities, despite the militia’s public assertions of autonomy (Hamid 1).

Not only is the SNC growing with new alliances, it increasingly resembles a functioning government. Separate from coordination with the FSA and LCC, the Syrian National Council boasts almost ten bureaus, managing revolutionary activity ranging from foreign relations to finance. And in contrast to early political organizers, the majority of the SNC’s members are not in exile. An estimated 60% reside and protest locally in Syria (“Syrian National”). While the organization of the

SNC's bureaus is notable, little information exists concerning the groups' bureaucratic contributions and their effectiveness. However, with its extensive network of alliances, its military wing and its figurehead endorsements, the SNC is now the most credible and effective threat against Asad and his associates.

A Second Winter of Protest

Large protest gatherings and the characteristically routine violence of the regime marked the end of Syria's autumn. By the beginning of November, UN estimates placed the civilian casualty rate of the nine-month protest movement at over 3,500. Such conditions allowed for the extensive development of the opposition's military, sworn to protect the nation's unarmed citizenry. On November 16, members of the FSA conducted a coordinated attack on a government air force intelligence facility, using directed small arms fire and rocket propelled grenades to destroy a symbol of state military might (Zambelis 1). This operation, unprecedented in its sophistication, displayed the advancement in training and teamwork among FSA soldiers since the groups' official establishment in July. In fact, the FSA has increased strikes on Asad's military, attacking another intelligence outpost on December 1st and adding military convoys and checkpoints to the list of attractive targets (1).

December marked one of the most violent months to date, despite President Asad's claims that he did not order the Syrian military's violent crackdown on protestors ("Syria News"). On Dec. 1, UN estimates placed total casualties at over 4,000; only two weeks later, the figure was raised to over 5,000. Rapid casualty

increases and international pressure prompted Syria to allow a team of Arab League monitors to enter the country in mid-December (“Syria News”). Although the Syrian government provided some concessions to the Arab League, the delegation has been criticized as wholly ineffective. Asad’s military continues to fire upon and kill protestors with the same regularity, virtually ignoring the presence of Arab League monitors. In fact, Col. Asad of the FSA recently vowed to “surprise the regime and the whole world” if Arab League visitors “are still not serious within a few days” (“Free” 1).

Absent the Arab League’s failed mission, international efforts to address Syria’s growing humanitarian crisis have all stalled, effectively allowing the Asad regime to maintain its suppressive operations without interference. UN resolutions designed to condemn Asad’s brutal crackdown have failed, as Russia and China continue to exercise veto powers that bar the issuance of any official international criticism. While regional powers such as Turkey have taken a leading role in accepting refugees, hosting opposition meetings, and attempting to coordinate dialogue on the crisis, no state has displayed a clear willingness to elevate pressure on Asad beyond sanctions.⁹

The endless cycle of violence associated with Syria’s protest movement is not abating, despite the arrival of a new year marking over ten months of mass demonstrations. On January 11, President Asad demonstrated his commitment to

⁹ The effect of these sanctions, too, remains unclear. Asad’s senior political and military allies continue to be loyal, indicating that economic pressure, while severe, has been unable to fracture or weaken the regime coalition.

sustaining this cycle, stating “there can be no let-up for terrorism—it must be hit with an iron fist” (“Syria News”). Today, no end to Syria’s Arab Spring is in sight.

Chapter 4:

Likely Scenarios for Syria's Future Political Landscape

What, then, does the future hold? Policymakers concerned with the domestic and foreign policy implications of regime change need credible future scenarios. Based on the historical interactions of the regime and its opposition, what are some likely scenarios concerning the nation's impending political landscape? Will Asad's government be restructured if he retains power, or is the opposition's demand for basic change likely to succeed? How might the rise or fall of certain actors affect both domestic and international Syrian affairs in the coming months?

Scenario 1: Asad Remains in Power

One feasible outcome of Syrian protests is that Bashar al-Asad retains control of the government and presidency. This would most likely occur in two ways. First, Asad could successfully crush the opposition, locating and dismantling operational branches of the Free Syrian Army, Syrian National Council and other organized groups. Full government control would also require the effective break-up of the largest mass protests in Syrian cities.

This outcome is impeded by the nature of local protests and their organizers. Leading members of Syria's opposition frequently operate anonymously, making it difficult for state intelligence officials to locate them. For example, members of the Local Coordination Committees communicate online through anonymous chats and smuggled wireless devices, effectively evading detection (Shadid "Coalition"). The

increasing strength and organization of both the FSA and SNC in recent months shows the futility of regime efforts thus far. As additional soldiers defect to the FSA and the SNC becomes more sophisticated, regime difficulties in combating these threats are likely to multiply.

Furthermore, the security services would have to employ extraordinary brutality to break up the huge, leaderless protests characteristic of the movement. To date, Syria's largest demonstrations have been remarkably unaffected by the indiscriminate violence of government soldiers. In fact, this sporadic violence may foster solidarity of citizens rather than instill fear of participation, as evidenced by recent protests involving tens of thousands of Syrians.

Finally, because international pressure on the regime is so high, Asad is unlikely to employ the much harsher tactics required to stop nationwide protests. Doing so could risk a foreign military intervention, which would further destabilize the regime and provide a tactical advantage to the opposition. At this point, however, Asad may not be fearful of foreign intervention. Russia and China's respective vetoes of UN resolutions condemning Syria, as well as Iran's threats against potential Western intrusions, have significantly elevated the political and material costs of any impending Western action.

A second way Asad could maintain his grip on power is through extensive internal reform. A substantial number of Syrians favor the stability under Asad over the untested, shaky foundations of a transitional government. This preference is embodied by groups like The Syrian National Coordination Committee (SNCC), a smaller but notable umbrella opposition group that supports dialogue with the

regime. In contrast to the SNC, Syrians affiliated with the SNCC believe in conditional, proactive engagement with the regime, supporting the established political order while simultaneously calling for internal democratic reform (Slim 1).

However, the viable window for Asad's peaceful retention of power is likely over, due to the regime's sustained violent response to protest. Opposition groups that initially supported government reforms, such as the SNC, demanded Asad's resignation only after government soldiers decided that killing hundreds of unarmed protestors was an appropriate response. Asad's violence has likely turned a considerable portion of each of Syria's sectarian groups against him, decreasing the likelihood that a substantial percentage of Syrian citizens would accept Asad's hold on the presidency despite any democratic reforms. In fact, Asad's removal of emergency laws, appointment of new government officials, amnesty programs and other conciliatory gestures have failed to appease a Syrian citizenry that demands nothing short of an entirely new government.

Scenario Two: Relatively Peaceful Power Transition

A second possible outcome of Syria's protest movement is that Asad cedes the presidency or is overthrown before a transitional government is peacefully instituted. This could happen in several ways. Mounting international pressure from sanctions, future foreign military intervention or combat successes by the Free Syrian Army all have the potential to irreversibly weaken the regime and the power of Asad's privileged inner circle. Any of these different pressures could force power changes in favor of Syria's opposition. Asad could step down on the condition of

immunity from prosecution, or he could attempt to flee the country. Leading members of Syrian opposition coalitions, such as the SNC, could fill Asad's void peacefully and serve as a transitional government before a new democratically elected government takes power in the country.

The "peaceful power transfer" scenario necessitates a fast and orderly takeover by Syria's largest opposition coalitions. This outcome assumes that Syria's still-divided factions such as the SNC, NCC, Kurdish groups, youth activists and other organizations can peacefully agree on representation in the transitional government. Additionally, the outcome assumes that any transitional government successfully produces a framework for Syria's new democratic system, preventing any devolution of negotiations into violent sectarian conflict.

Furthermore, this scenario presumes that Asad's voluntary departure or overthrow would be accepted by his inner circle. At this stage in the protest movement, Asad's senior military officials, elite business partners and other allies simply have too much to lose through submission. Many of these Alawis or privileged friends of the regime undoubtedly fear the reprisals of an angry transitional government, and will remain a cohesive group until provided with clear indications that they face a complete and imminent defeat.

While more likely than scenario one, scenario two relies too heavily on shaky assumptions regarding the ability of opposition factions to unify. Several recent developments indicate leading opposition groups will have trouble agreeing on future representation in government, especially while attempting to fill Syria's power vacuum in a timely manner. Kurdish groups have expressed dissatisfaction

over their representation in the SNC. Members of the SNC, SNCC and FSA continue to spar over positions on foreign military intervention and engagement with the regime, further exposing rifts in fundamental perception between the three leading groups (Slim). Ultimately, the pressures of creating a fair, representative government may expose and exacerbate these disagreements, making peaceful resolution of power change impossible.

Scenario Three: Civil War

Continued fragmentation within Syria's opposition and the historic divide between the country's various ethnic groups makes civil war the most likely outcome for Syria's political future. Several factors, merely problematic when evaluated individually, combine to make violent sectarian conflict probable should Asad create a power vacuum by stepping down. Similarly, Asad's likely refusal to step down could create circumstances encouraging prolonged conflict.

As stated in context of scenario two, Syria's opposition is still divided, with several leading groups expressing disagreement over issues ranging from protest methodology to future representation. Additionally, the opposition is relatively disorganized. Leading coalitions have not agreed upon an outline for transitional government structure, which could help prevent unrest in the event of the regime's overthrow.

The opposition's indistinct leadership structure increases the likelihood that negotiations will devolve into violent conflict. Although many principal opposition groups are aligned in coalitions, leaders in each are still widely independent. For

example, youth activists leading the Local Coordination Committees endorse the SNC, yet operate directly as managers of tens of thousands of protesting Syrians. Similarly, activists not affiliated with the SNC or LCC may serve as legitimate, recognized leaders in more localized demonstrations. At the same time, tensions within the FSA threaten to split the group into two separate militias and fragment the cohesion of Syria's armed resistance and its relationship to the oppositions' political coalition. If a power vacuum is created, which of these leaders can make legitimate claims of supremacy? Disagreement over Syria's individual leaders, not just leading groups, have the potential to spiral into violence.

Most basically, perhaps, Sunni victimization and Alawi domination fosters sectarian mistrust that is wholly detrimental to reconciliation. Middle and lower class Sunnis and Alawis have completely different perceptions of power and representation, as minority Alawis reaped preferential benefits for years at the expense of Syria's Sunni peasant majority. Decades of disproportionately allocated power will likely foment discord in debates on the future roles of Alawis and Sunnis in government positions.

Conversely, traditionally marginalized groups that had some political and religious freedom under the regime may actually fight for Asad, preferring the stability of these benefits to an unsure future. For example, many of Syria's Christians, who account for approximately 10 percent of the population, fear the loss of basic freedoms like the right to attend church, celebrate holidays and dress freely that could be reversed under Islamic rule. For Christians, Asad "remains predictable in a region where unpredictability has driven [Christians] from war-

racked places like Iraq and Lebanon, and where others have felt threatened in postrevolutionary Egypt,” where thousands of Christians have fled the country in fear of religious persecution (“Fearing”; Birnbaum).

Other minority groups, such as Kurds, share similar fears regarding Syria’s uncertain political future. Until one of the groups’ leading figureheads was assassinated in October, Kurds were hesitant to support the opposition based on their fear of even more oppressive government under conservative Arab Sunnis. However, the assassination of Mashaal Tammo, widely believed to have been orchestrated by the regime, finally mobilized Syria’s Kurds to protest against the regime. Soon afterward, the group established their own prominent opposition organizations distinct from previously mentioned coalitions. Parties like the Kurdish National Council collectively demand Kurdish rights to self-determination and the institution of a federalist political system (“Syrian Kurds”). In recent months, Kurdish representatives even announced plans for the first conference to unify Kurdish parties and open dialogue with the general Arab opposition (Blomfield 20). These groups will surely challenge the SNC and other umbrella groups for greater political representation, which could also have a negative effect on opposition solidarity.

Conflicting Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish, Christian and Druze loyalties suggest that Syria’s general population is not overwhelmingly supportive of the oppositions’ goals. While it is impossible to speculate accurately on the distribution of Asad’s enemies and followers, it is very likely that fears of future retribution and marginalization under a new government, or simple change to the status quo, place

a substantial number of Syria's citizens in the pro-Asad or neutral camp. As stated previously, Alawis make up 12% of the population, while Syria's Christians and Kurds both make up approximately 10%. The combination of all three historically pro-Asad (or anti-change) groups suggests that as much as 30-35% of Syria's citizens may still remain loyal to the regime.¹⁰ Regardless of the exact figure, it should be noted that Syria's population, and not only the opposition, is fragmented with regard to a stance towards the regime.

The combination of all these likely factors has the potential to overwhelm the opposition's fragile unity. Unless the opposition takes significant strides to form clear leadership and outline universally accepted figures for group representation, any efforts to transfer power peacefully to representatives of Syria's diverse communities will likely usher in prolonged violent conflict.

¹⁰ This speculative claim may be supported by evidence of protest activity in two of Asad's greatest strongholds, Damascus and Aleppo. To date, remarkably little violent activity or protest has occurred in both cities, which house large numbers of Syria's Christian and Alawite communities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, only Syria's citizenry is capable of determining this future configuration and the steps needed to reach it. In previous pages, I have attempted to provide the most accurate historical representation of these citizens to facilitate hypotheses regarding the fate of the nation.

The paper's first section on regime strengths and vulnerabilities displayed the key characteristics of Asad's regime that both challenge and aid the efforts of the Syrian opposition. Asad's Muslim self-identification, friendly relations with Iran and consolidation of the state's military, intelligence and media collectively represent an enormous obstacle to political change. Recent events have shown that regardless of the regime's most glaring policy failures, mere protest will not produce substantive change. In order for new leadership to arise, Syria's opposition must overcome the challenge of asymmetric conflict against a more powerful, organized regime.

The ability of the opposition to survive these costs is directly linked to its capacity to unite. The second section of this paper attempts to trace this capacity, focusing on the oppositions' chronological development to highlight the most important factors influencing cycles of protestors' unification and fragmentation.

As the second section segues into an analysis of the current protest movement, the political, ethnic, and sectarian factors that most heavily influence Syria's modern protest movement become clearer. Chapter Three evaluates the country's emerging opposition, using the previous chapter's findings as the basis to analyze opposition prospects for success. The third chapter also examines Asad's

recent reaction to protests, which of course continuously redefines the options available to the opposition.

Finally, the last chapter suggests possible future scenarios. As protests approach their one-year anniversary, there is little doubt that any Syrian government, led by Asad or not, will undergo considerable and unprecedented restructuring. However, the political future of the nation remains largely unclear. International pressure, impending foreign interventions, regime defections and a whole host of other actions could shape changes in Syria's power structure.

Further research and analysis with the intent of providing policy recommendations is required, especially once specific actors secure a clear political victory in Syria. Whether Asad retains power or is replaced by an opposition group, new political leaders must be evaluated using the same type of historical analysis. This analysis will help policymakers make educated predictions about the domestic and foreign policy implications of new Syrian leadership.

Ideally, Syria's opposition can unite, organize and faithfully represent all major groups within the country's borders. While avoiding my hypothesized outcome of civil war will require great political dexterity, a peaceful transition would be the optimal ending to a conflict that continues to claim thousands of innocent lives.

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