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## Tracking the “Arab Spring”

# SYRIA AND THE FUTURE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

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As the third anniversary of the Arab uprisings draws nearer, the democratic possibilities that they appeared to create have receded. Among the countries that experienced significant mass protest movements in early 2011, only Tunisia seems likely to produce a consolidated democracy in the foreseeable future. In every other case, transitions have revealed the difficulty of overcoming the stubborn institutional and social legacies of authoritarian rule, and the extraordinary lengths to which authoritarian regimes will go to survive. In Syria, any possibility that protesters might bring about the breakdown of authoritarianism and initiate a transition to democracy was extinguished early on, first by the Assad regime’s ferocious repression and then by the country’s descent into a brutal and increasingly sectarian civil war. Grim statistics only hint at the toll: more than a hundred thousand killed, millions more forced to flee, and eight million in need of humanitarian aid. Officials of the United Nations describe Syria as the worst humanitarian disaster since Rwanda in 1994, and instability is rising among Syria’s Arab neighbors.

The democratic aspirations of the protesters who filled streets and public squares across Syria in early 2011 were among the conflict’s first casualties. If democracy as an outcome of the uprising was always uncertain, democratic prospects have been severely crippled by the devastation of civil war and the deepening fragmentation of Syrian society. Whether ethnosectarian diversity is a cause of conflict remains deeply contested.<sup>1</sup> However, countries emerging from ethnosectarian civil wars are widely understood to be among the least likely to democratize once conflict ends.<sup>2</sup> Postconflict democratization in such cases fails far more often than it succeeds.<sup>3</sup> More than half of all countries that experience civil wars relapse into conflict after a period of interim peace.<sup>4</sup>

In Syria, however, democratic prospects appear bleak for reasons that extend beyond the destructive effects of civil war. Conflict has not only eroded possibilities for democratic reform, but it has also provided the impetus for a process of authoritarian restructuring that has increased the Assad regime's ability to survive mass protests, repress an armed uprising, and resist international sanctions. Even as state institutions have all but collapsed under the weight of armed conflict, war making has compelled the Assad regime to reconfigure its social base, tighten its dependency on global authoritarian networks, adapt its modes of economic governance, and restructure its military and security apparatus. While the outcome of the current conflict cannot be predicted, these adaptations are likely to influence how Syria is governed once fighting ends. Should they become consolidated, they will vastly diminish prospects for a postconflict democratic transition, especially if Syria ends up either formally or informally partitioned.

### **War Making and Authoritarian Adaptation**

The role of war as a catalyst for authoritarian restructuring in Syria, and the obstacles that this process poses for political reform, are noteworthy for several reasons. First, research on war and democratization has found little correlation between regime type at the outset of conflict and prospects for democratization once conflict ends. The presence of an authoritarian regime at the start of a civil war has not been found to reduce the chances for a postconflict transition to democracy. According to Leonard Wantchekon, for example, civil war so thoroughly destroys prewar political systems that they exert little influence on the shape of postconflict settlements. Distinguishing between authoritarian breakdown and war as causes of democratization, he argues that "war itself has such a profound effect on the government that post-civil war democracy is more an institutional response to civil war than to pre-civil war authoritarian rule. In Mozambique and Nicaragua, the civil war almost annihilated the authoritarian political situation that led to war." In cases of authoritarian breakdown that do not involve civil war, however, "many features of the previous regimes have [persisted]."<sup>5</sup>

Syria's experience challenges these claims, for several reasons. It highlights the possibility that an authoritarian regime might adapt to the demands of an insurgency, increasing the likelihood of regime survival and affecting both the outcome of a conflict and whether a postwar political settlement will be democratic. Syria's civil war is far from over. It is possible that the authoritarian system of rule initiated by the Ba'ath Party in the early 1960s and later captured by the Assad family and its clients will yet be "annihilated" as a result of protracted civil war. Such an outcome would broaden the range of potential postconflict settlements to include a transition to democracy.

From the vantage point of the latter half of 2013, however, the process of authoritarian restructuring that the regime has undergone during two years of armed insurgency makes such an outcome far less likely. What seems more plausible is that the repressive and corrupt authoritarian regime that entered civil war in 2011 will emerge from it as an even more brutal, narrowly sectarian, and militarized version of its former self.

Second, the Assad regime's reconfiguration over the past two years stands out as an extreme instance of a broader phenomenon: the adaptation of Middle Eastern authoritarianism to the challenges posed by the renewal of mass politics.<sup>6</sup> As waves of protest spread across the region in early 2011, authoritarian regimes appeared more vulnerable than at any time in the contemporary history of the Middle East. Protest movements gave voice to the failure of Arab autocrats to address deeply held economic, social, and political grievances, challenging notions of authoritarian regimes as adaptive and capable of adjusting their strategies and tactics to changing conditions. These movements would help to topple four longtime rulers—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—while threatening the stability of others. As popular struggles continued throughout much of the region, analysts began to reassess longstanding assumptions about the durability and adaptability of authoritarianism in the Arab world.<sup>7</sup>

Since those heady days almost three years ago, however, the limits of mass politics have become clearer. Ruling elites from Morocco to Bahrain have learned to contain popular demands, reassert control over restive societies, and recalibrate ruling formulas to limit the revolutionary potential of protest movements.<sup>8</sup> Attention is thus pivoting back to the dynamics of authoritarian governance and to the strategies that Arab autocrats and militaries have deployed to preserve their hold on power. As the July 2013 coup in Egypt demonstrates, these adaptations have been decidedly authoritarian and are often both repressive and exclusionary, yet they do not follow a uniform template. Their shape has varied from the strategies of contained accommodation seen in Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco to the more coercive approaches of Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Despite this variation, these experiences all stand as case studies in the recombinant capacity of authoritarian regimes, the dynamics of authoritarian learning, and the conditions under which such learning contributes to regime survival.

Lastly, while Syria may be an extreme case, it is not an outlier as regards the violence that has marked the Assad regime's response to the rise of mass politics. The brutality of the regime's tactics falls at the far end of a spectrum of reactions to antiregime protests. These tactics reflect Syria's distinctive social composition, institutional make-up, and political orientation as a lead member of the "resistance front" facing Israel. In their details, therefore, the adaptations that are reshaping au-

thoritarianism in Syria may not be generalizable to regimes that govern differently configured societies and polities. Yet milder versions of the Assad regime's coercive tactics may be seen on the streets of both Bahrain and Egypt, underscoring the insights that can be gleaned from the Syrian case into how Arab autocrats will react as the dynamics of mass politics continue to unfold in today's Middle East.

The adaptations of the Assad regime can be traced to the earliest months of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, if not earlier. Syrian scholar Hassan Abbas says that in February 2011, President Bashar al-Assad "formed a special committee" which concluded that the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had failed because they did not crush the protests instantly.<sup>9</sup> Thus, almost as soon as the first major protest broke out in the southern city of Deraa on 18 March 2011, the Assad regime started shooting.<sup>10</sup> As more protestors took up arms to defend themselves, the regime escalated its violence to the level of large-scale military offensives involving armored units and heavy artillery against major urban centers. It also moved to brand a peaceful and cross-sectarian protest movement as a terrorist campaign led by Islamist extremists. Peaceful protests continued across much of the country into 2012, but the uprising gradually transformed into a full-fledged and increasingly sectarian civil war.

The regime's responses to these developments included a set of internal institutional adaptations and policy shifts. They also included modifications to its management of regional and international relations in the face of deepening international isolation and the imposition of a dense web of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Domestically, the Assad regime has promoted exclusionary sectarian mobilization to reinforce defensive solidarity among the regime's core social base in the Alawite community and non-Muslim minorities—benefiting from but also contributing to broader trends toward regional sectarian polarization. It has reconfigured the security sector, including the armed forces, paramilitary criminal networks, and the intelligence and security apparatus to confront forms of resistance (in particular, the decentralized guerrilla tactics of armed insurgents) for which the security sector was unprepared and poorly trained.

Regime officials have reasserted the role of the state as an agent of redistribution and provider of economic security—despite the utter destruction of the country's economy and infrastructure. Officials now blame the limited economic reforms championed by economist and former deputy prime minister Abdullah Dardari as the cause of grievances that moved citizens to rebel. The regime has also continued to make use of state-controlled Internet and telecommunications infrastructure to disrupt communications among regime opponents, identify and target opposition supporters, and disseminate proregime narratives. At the regional and international levels, the Assad regime has exploited its stra-

tegic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah both for direct military and financial assistance and also for expertise and training in specific modes of repression, including urban and cyber warfare, in which its own security sector lacked experience.

### Leveraging Strategic Relationships

The regime has similarly exploited its strategic and diplomatic relationships with Russia, China, and other authoritarian counterparts. These give the regime sources of direct military and financial support as well as a set of advocates who act on its behalf within international institutions—a role that neither Iran nor Hezbollah is able to play. One of the effects is to insulate the Assad regime from the force of UN-backed sanctions that might otherwise impede the ability of its key authoritarian allies to provide it with essential assistance.

These relationships, especially the regime's ties to Iran and Hezbollah, have implications not only for the survival of the Assad regime but for the shape of an eventual postconflict settlement. First, Iran, with Russian support, seeks a role for itself in the event that negotiations to end Syria's civil war take place. While the United States and its European allies currently oppose such a role, they recognize that for a negotiated settlement to be stable it will need to take Iran's interests into account, decreasing prospects for an eventual transition to democracy. Second, and perhaps more important, as the Assad regime deepens its dependence on authoritarian allies and is increasingly isolated from both Western democracies and international organizations populated by democracies, it becomes further embedded in relationships that diminish opportunities to moderate its authoritarian practices through either of the modes identified by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way ("linkage" and "leverage") or through other forms of conditionality.<sup>11</sup>

These adaptations can be seen as extensions of earlier strategies of authoritarian upgrading, but with a more compact, militarized, sectarian, exclusionary, and repressive core.<sup>12</sup> That the Assad regime could accomplish these shifts was by no means certain. For many years, the regime's critics have described it as little more than an inept mafia, sometimes likening Bashar al-Assad to the fictional Fredo Corleone. As recently as mid-2012, the regime's survival seemed very much in doubt. Opposition forces had seized much ground, including most of the Damascus suburbs, and many observers were predicting the regime's imminent collapse.

Mafias, however, do not have sovereignty. They do not control armed forces. They do not have vast state institutions and state resources at their disposal. While its supporters fretted, the Assad regime recalibrated its military tactics and reconfigured its security apparatus. With a capacity for learning that has surprised its detractors, the regime inte-

grated loyalist *shabiha* militias (the word means “ghost” or “thug”)—including a wide array of armed criminal and informal elements—into a formal paramilitary, the National Defense Forces (NDF), under direct regime control. Since mid-2012, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of NDF members have gone through combat training in Iran, a direct form of authoritarian knowledge transfer. Following defections among lower-ranking Sunni conscripts and officers, new methods of monitoring and controlling soldiers’ movements were adopted. Iranian and Hezbollah advisors arrived to teach local commanders the fine points of crowd control, urban warfare, and insurgent tactics. The regime expanded its dependence on battle-hardened Hezbollah combat units, enabling it to regain control of strategic sites.

Exploiting its monopoly of air power, the regime has sown chaos and instability in opposition-held areas, driving millions of Syrians out of their homes, eroding popular morale and support for the opposition, and preventing stabilization or reconstruction in opposition-controlled areas. Official media routinely highlight the prominent role of militant Islamists associated with al-Qaeda in opposition ranks to reinforce the uprising-as-Sunni-terrorism narrative, and tout the regime’s commitment to minority protection and secularism (its reliance on Iran and Hezbollah notwithstanding) to rally its base. The regime has also restructured key institutions, including the Ba’ath Party, to enhance cohesion and ensure the fealty of senior officials to President Assad and his immediate family.

By mid-2013, this amalgam of ad hoc adaptations permitted the regime to reclaim authority over most of the country’s urban “spine” from Homs in the north to Damascus in the south. The adaptations solidified support among the regime’s social base, prevented the fracturing of its inner circle, and disrupted attempts to return life to normal in areas outside regime control. The regime now dominates the strategically important Mediterranean coast and every major city except Aleppo. It has secure access to Hezbollah-controlled parts of Lebanon and to the sea. With the partial exception of central Damascus, this zone has suffered massive destruction, economic paralysis, and large-scale population movements. Accurate statistics are not available, but it is safe to say that Homs now has many fewer Sunnis, while Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, Hama, and other areas under regime control have seen large inflows of internally displaced persons—perhaps numbering in the millions—including Christians, Alawites, and Sunnis fleeing the instability and violence of insurgent-held territories.

In the decades before the war, Syria’s population of 22 million—which is 65 to 70 percent Sunni Arab, 10 to 12 percent Sunni Kurdish, 10 to 12 percent Alawite, and 10 to 12 percent Druze, Christian, and other non-Sunni minorities—had become increasingly dispersed across the country, shrinking the areas inhabited almost exclusively by one

community or another. Urban centers had become increasingly cosmopolitan, benefiting from the inflow of Alawites and Kurds and from processes of urban migration as Syria's economy modernized. The vast population displacement caused by the war is producing fundamental shifts in these trends. It has increased sectarian segregation within cities even as they become more diverse in the aggregate due to internal displacement. It has also led to partial sectarian cleansing in rural areas, destroying longstanding patterns of intersectarian tolerance between Sunni and minority villages in conflict-affected areas.

Whether the regime's changes will be enough to ensure its survival is uncertain. Also uncertain is whether adaptations made to defeat a popular insurrection will last once conflict ends. There is no reason to imagine that the regime will not evolve further as its environment changes. Contrary to notions that civil war wipes the political slate clean, the available evidence suggests that Bashar al-Assad and his regime are determined to remain central to any postwar political order, whether it comes via the military defeat of its adversaries or through internationally supervised negotiations. Even as conflict rages across the country, and with more than half of Syria's territory outside regime control, Bashar al-Assad has signaled his intent to seek reelection when his current term as president expires in 2014—potentially imposing a macabre veneer of faux-democratic legitimacy on a regime that the UN Human Rights Commission has condemned repeatedly for gross and systematic violations of human rights, atrocities against its own people, and crimes against humanity.

### Explaining Authoritarian Adaptations

Authoritarian survivors across the Middle East have adapted to the challenges posed by the Arab uprisings. Yet the form that such adaptations have taken is a product of the specific domestic and external resources that define any given regime's "opportunity set." There is a strong path-dependent quality to the adaptive choices of regimes: Existential crises have not been moments of creative innovation among the Arab world's authoritarian survivors. Instead, adaptations have tended to magnify regimes' existing attributes as rulers turn to strategies that have proven their effectiveness in the past.

In the Syrian case, three such resources have been particularly important. The first is how patterns of elite recruitment have strengthened the cohesion of formal institutions, notably the extent to which the regime has populated senior positions in the armed forces and the security apparatus with Alawite loyalists. For Eva Bellin, this makes Syria the example *par excellence* of a coercive apparatus organized along patrimonial lines, with more at risk from reform than its less patrimonial counterparts, and more willing to use coercive means to repress reformers.<sup>13</sup>



Patrimonialism, however, is a broad-spectrum diagnosis. It cannot by itself explain the cohesion of the Syrian officer corps and its continued loyalty to the regime. Contra Bellin's prediction, even large-scale and persistent social mobilization has not eroded the regime's will to repress. Escalating violence did produce cracks in the military. Tens of thousands of rank-and-file conscripts, together with more than fifty non-Alawite generals and other senior officers, defected rather than shoot fellow citizens.

Yet the center held. It did so because patterns of recruitment into the upper ranks of the military and its elite units were not simply patrimonial, but also sectarian and exclusionary in character. Identity-based recruitment was explicitly designed to strengthen bonds between the regime and senior officers, to raise the cost of defection, and to make defending the regime the military's top priority. The result is an almost entirely Alawite officer corps that is stubbornly loyal to the Assads, willing to use every weapon it can (from cluster bombs and ballistic missiles to helicopter gunships and, reportedly, chemical munitions), and annealed against repeated attempts to persuade key figures to defect. Specific patterns of patrimonialism thus produce distinctive forms of cohesion and provide regimes with widely varying organizational, coercive, and adaptive capacities.

At the same time, even if the defection of the military may be fatal for an authoritarian incumbent its cohesion is no guarantee of survival, especially once regime violence propels social mobilization beyond protest to the point of armed insurgency. Throughout 2012, with defections sweeping the rank and file, opposition forces seizing territory, and key units pushed to the point of exhaustion, it was far from clear that the cohesion of the officer corps and security elites would prevent the overthrow of the regime. A second resource played a critical role in stemming opposition advances and stabilizing the regime: informal networks of nonstate actors, organized on the basis of familial ties, sectarian affinity, or simple mercenary arrangements, and cultivated by regime elites over the years to provide a range of (often illegal) functions that could be conducted without any formal scrutiny or accountability.

Prior to the uprising, members of these networks, typically described as *shabiha*, engaged in officially sanctioned criminal activities, served as regime enforcers, and used violence to protect the privileges and status of regime elites. When protests began in March 2011, the regime recruited these loose networks to brutalize demonstrators.<sup>14</sup> As the opposition militarized, these criminal networks were gradually transformed, first into informal and decentralized paramilitary groups and later into more formally structured armed units that have been integrated into the regime's security apparatus. Almost exclusively Alawite in composition, *shabiha* forces are responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the civil war. They serve as shock troops, defend Alawite and minority

communities against opposition attacks, terrorize and brutalize Sunni communities, assist the regime in controlling army units to prevent desertions and defections, and fight alongside the armed forces in of-

fensives against opposition-held areas. They provide levels of cohesion and loyalty that sustain the regime's capacity to repress far more effectively than it could with ordinary conscripts. Had it not been possible for the regime to draw on and professionalize these informal sectarian-criminal networks, its prospects for survival would be much more precarious.

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A third critical resource grows out of the Assad regime's alliances with Hezbollah and Iran, and the additional military capacity that both have provided. Hezbollah has dispatched

thousands of fighters to assist the regime in a major offensive against opposition-held positions in western Syria along the border with Lebanon, in Homs, and in the suburbs ringing Damascus. Iran is alleged to have dispatched its own combat forces as well, and has sent military and security advisors who have produced tangible improvements in regime units' combat effectiveness. Perhaps most important, however, has been an explicit effort to model the newly established NDF after the Iranian Basij, a "volunteer people's militia" created at the urging of Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War that subsequently became a central component of Iran's internal-security apparatus and played a major role in the suppression of the "Green Movement" protests following Iran's 2009 presidential election.

Authoritarian learning and knowledge transfer have thus produced significant adaptations in the scale and organization of the Assad regime's coercive apparatus, enhancing its capacity to fight a popular armed insurgency. They have also amplified that regime's existing tendencies, boosting sectarian hard-liners and institutionalizing repressive exclusionary practices within what is left of the Syrian state. To be sure, the regime has leveraged its strategic relationships with Iran, Hezbollah, and other authoritarian actors for purposes that go well beyond the upgrading of its coercive apparatus. Iran has provided the regime with billions of dollars in the form of loans and contracts. Russia has provided arms, money, and diplomatic cover, several times voting to prevent the imposition of UN Security Council sanctions. China has followed Russia within the UN, though it has otherwise played a negligible role with respect to Syria thus far. Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of the Assad regime's coercive apparatus, and the consolidation of power within institutions organized

along exclusionary sectarian lines, are most consequential for the kind of postwar political arrangements that will emerge, and least conducive to the prospects for an eventual transition to democracy.

Other elements of regime adaptation since March 2011 have been less effective. These include its attempts to distance itself from the economic reforms of the 2000s, to reassert a more active role for the state in managing Syria's war-shattered economy, and to extract resources and support from the business networks that it helped to create over the previous decade. During the 2000s, the Assad regime enriched itself and new coalitions of state-business elites and private businesses by, in effect, corruptly exploiting economic liberalization.<sup>15</sup> In the process, it sidelined and alienated large segments of Syrian society that had benefited from their positions within state institutions and the Ba'ath Party.<sup>16</sup>

These shifts in patterns of patronage and economic governance were intended to strengthen the regime's economic base but have proven problematic since March 2011. On one hand, they fueled the economic grievances and resentments among former regime clients that sparked mass protests in March 2011. On the other hand, they fostered the regime's dependence on business networks whose loyalty to the regime has proven less durable as Syria's conflict has dragged on. While the regime continues to benefit from the loyalty of a shrinking cohort of key business cronies, Syria's private sector more broadly has withdrawn its political and financial support, forcing the regime to become increasingly predatory in its extraction of desperately needed revenues. In response, officials have returned to the populist rhetoric of an earlier era, but with little practical impact thus far. With Syria's economy in a state of complete collapse, economic and social policy have become little more than tools in the regime's fight for survival. Nonetheless, its recent criticism of neoliberal economic reforms as responsible for the grievances that drove Syrians into the streets has echoed a theme often heard since 2011 from Arab governments, including both authoritarian survivors and those undergoing postauthoritarian transitions.

## **Opposition Responses to Regime Adaptation**

The transformations undertaken by the Assad regime are not occurring in a vacuum. Nor is the gradual, bloody reconsolidation of the regime entirely a product of its own actions. It has benefited from an opposition that is divided along many different lines yet increasingly dominated by Islamist extremists. These latter include terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and Ahrar al-Sham, whose vision for Syria's future is no less sectarian, repressive, and exclusionary than that of the Assad regime itself. The opposition leadership that has emerged outside Syria, including the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (better known as

the Syrian Coalition or SC) and its military wing, the Supreme Military Council (SMC), have repeatedly affirmed their intent to create a “civil democratic Syria.”<sup>17</sup> The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which holds more seats within the SC than any other party or movement, in March 2012 publicly affirmed its commitment to “a civil and democratic republican state with a parliamentary system, in which all the people are treated equal regardless of faith or ethnicity.”<sup>18</sup>

As violence within Syria has escalated, however, the external opposition has largely failed to establish its legitimacy, credibility, or even relevance to Syrians living under the authority of local and foreign armed groups. A significant (if hard to measure) segment of Syria’s non-Sunni minorities and Kurdish population have not found the external opposition’s commitment to a civil, inclusive democracy sufficiently credible to persuade them to abandon the Assad regime and join the uprising.

Such a commitment is even less evident among the opposition’s internal leadership. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), a highly decentralized and loosely coordinated network of hundreds of armed groups, including local civil-defense units, groups of defectors from the Syrian military, and foreign fighters, was formally established in July 2011 to defend peaceful protests from regime attacks. By mid-2013, its numbers had increased, nominally, to some 80,000 fighters, yet less than a third of the battalions identified with the FSA could be said to operate under the leadership of the SMC.<sup>19</sup> Political authority within opposition-held territories has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of those who command local battalions, the largest and most effective of which are affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Mujahideen, and other Salafist groups that explicitly reject democracy, espouse strict adherence to rigid interpretations of Islamic law, have themselves been accused of atrocities, and have contributed to the intensification of ethnosectarian tensions within the opposition—a trend that the Assad regime has avidly exploited.

The regime has particularly benefited from violent clashes among elements of the armed opposition. These fights have pitted moderate battalions loyal to the SMC against their Salafist counterparts, Syrians against foreign fighters, and, most recently, Arab Salafists against Kurdish forces in Syria’s “liberated” northeastern regions. The Arab-nationalist rhetoric of the secular opposition and the Islamist ideologies of leading armed groups have fortified the ambivalence that Syria’s Kurds feel regarding their role in the uprising and their future in a post-Assad Syria. Violent clashes between Kurdish forces and Salafist battalions have reinforced the inclination among Kurdish political parties and movements to exploit the uprising on behalf of long-held demands for Kurdish autonomy.

Although Kurds, along with other minorities, are active in the political and military wings of the opposition, Kurdish leaders frequently complain about underrepresentation within opposition structures and

preserve their independence from the SC. At times, Arab oppositionists have accused their Kurdish counterparts of cooperating with the Assad regime. These frictions have distracted the opposition while the regime reasserts its control over previously liberated areas. The frictions also increase the likelihood that Syria will end up fragmented into three warring zones: one controlled by the regime, one by the Arab opposition, and a third by Kurdish forces allied with Kurdish counterparts in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey.

The transformation of Syria's opposition since 2011 has been remarkable. What began as a peaceful protest movement calling for democratic change and defended by moderate armed groups is now a thoroughly militarized, militantly Islamist armed movement wracked by internal fissures and frictions, bereft of a coherent and effective political leadership, and hard-pressed to respond to a reconsolidated regime backed by a stubbornly cohesive security apparatus. These changes have certainly contributed to the renewed momentum of the regime and its supporters. The shifts help to validate the opposition-as-terrorist narrative that the regime has cultivated from the start of the uprising. They sustain the defensive solidarity with the regime that is evident among Alawites and other minorities, many of whom are bound to the Assads more by fear than by loyalty. They have been exploited effectively by Russia and Iran in justifying their support for the Assad regime, and have eroded Western backing for the opposition.

Yet the course that the opposition has taken is not entirely a product of its own intentions or design. The Assad regime itself has helped to mold that course, by resorting immediately and disproportionately to violence when protests first broke out in March 2011, by relentlessly demonizing protesters, by sowing fear among the populace whom it still controls, and by creating disorder in the areas that it has lost to the opposition. In this sense, there are clear and significant interaction effects between how the regime has adapted to the challenges of mass politics—driving peaceful protests toward an armed insurgency—and the transformations experienced within the opposition. Extremism, polarization, and fragmentation are much easier targets for the regime than peaceful protesters seeking constitutional and economic reforms. Its cynical manipulation of the opposition succeeded, but at a terrible price. The regime has also failed to defeat the insurgency despite the concerted military efforts of Assad's forces, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. Indeed, even as the regime was regaining lost ground along the coast and in villages near Latakia, it continued to lose new ground to opposition forces in the south, in Aleppo, and on the outskirts of Damascus itself.

### **A Darker Outlook**

The Assad regime's fate remains uncertain. The regime's learning and the adaptations that it has undergone since 2011 may not save it

from defeat, and will surely (should it survive) weaken its ability to govern all or part of what remains of prewar Syria when the conflict ends. Yet some tentative conclusions can be drawn about the future of authoritarianism in Syria, and perhaps more broadly, from the ways in which the Assad regime has reconfigured itself since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. Much of the Assad regime's experience is *sui generis*, driven by the scale of violence that it unleashed and by the distinctive resources at its disposal. Yet its underlying strategies reveal features that are visible to varying degrees among other authoritarian survivors in the Middle East as they struggle to adapt to the revival of mass politics. Few of these features offer a basis for optimism concerning Syria's democratic prospects—or the region's.

In Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, nervous and embattled rulers have turned to ethnosectarian and exclusionary strategies of popular mobilization in order to shore up regime support within divided societies. Regimes across the region have reconfigured and upgraded their coercive capacities to contend with mass protests, uprisings, or insurgencies. Democratization's chances, never strong to begin with, have suffered amid the fallout as dissent and protest have come to be defined as threats to the security of the nation. Syria presents additional disturbing elements: a regime whose social base has been welded into the security apparatus; ordinary citizens who now act as agents of regime repression; regime-society relations defined to a disturbing degree by shared participation in repression.

In the Syrian case, this narrowing has been critical for regime survival. Yet it has also enhanced the capacity of an increasingly repressive and sectarian authoritarian regime to define postconflict political arrangements (if indeed the Assad regime survives the war); gives authoritarian allies greater influence over the terms of an eventual political settlement; and diminishes the leverage that Western democracies might bring to bear for the sake of moving Syria toward a more democratic postwar political order. Syria represents an extreme instance of these trends, but it is far from alone: The Arab uprisings have generated a broad increase in the interdependence of authoritarian survivors across the Middle East—tightening connections among the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as they worked to help repress mass protests that threatened the ruling Khalifa family in Bahrain, for instance, and also strengthening ties between the GCC and the ruling monarchies of Jordan and Morocco.

The uprisings of 2011 marked a moment of unprecedented challenge for the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East. The only world region that had experienced neither a single authoritarian breakdown nor a single transition to democracy found itself shocked by a wave of mass protests that led in less than a year to the overthrow of four longstanding autocrats—men who between them had held power for 132 years.

Yet for protesters across much of the rest of the Arab world, including Syria, the response was quite different. The Assad regime brought the full weight of its repressive apparatus down on the heads of peaceful protesters, provoking reactions that led gradually to civil war. Conflict has erased the Syria that existed prior to the civil war, yet it has not “annihilated” the authoritarian regime that drove Syria into the war. When it comes to details, the specific form that authoritarian adaptations have taken in the Syrian case differs from what we see elsewhere in the region. Yet the trends that civil war has amplified and exaggerated are not unique to Syria. Authoritarian survivors throughout the region have moved in directions similar to those evinced by the Assad regime. Even as the aftershocks of the Arab uprisings continue to make themselves felt across the Middle East, it seems that the future of Arab authoritarianism, like that of the Assad regime itself, will be darker, more repressive, more sectarian, and even more deeply resistant to democratization than in the past.

## NOTES

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