Geopolitical Dimensions of the Syrian Crisis

Regime survival depends on a tight grip on Damascus and a delicate manipulation of regional and international contradictions

By Jamal Wakim[1]

In January 2011, a wave of demonstrations in Tunisia toppled the regime of President Zeinelabedin Ben Ali (r. 1987-2011), sparking the Arab Spring that spread to many Arab countries including Syria. The protests led to the removal of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011), and the Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (r. 1978-2011), yet it fell short of ousting president Bashar al-Assad (r 2000-) in spite of mounting local opposition to his rule, and in spite of western and Arab pressures on him. In this article, I argue that the Syrian crisis was caused by local factors, but acquired regional and international dimensions, due to interference from contending regional and international powers, and that the reasons for Bashar's ability to stay in office were his ability to remain in control of Damascus, and to manipulate the differences among regional and international powers. Bashar is continuing the strategy of his father Hafez al-Assad (r.1970-2000), mainly to maintain political stability and impose strong authority and control of Damascus, the capital city of Syria, assuring the loyalty of its elite, and to preserve a delicate balance among different regions, tribes, confessions and ethnicities. For this reason, I address the subject of the political geography of Syria, a country that was established in 1920 in the Levant, a region that was subject to competition between major powers since early history.

The axial role of Damascus

The Levant included Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. Since early history, this region served as a buffer zone between Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The Levant was also vulnerable to Bedouin incursions from Arabia. Syrian politics in the twentieth century was continuously unstable due to the rivalries of three geopolitical powers: Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. Lebanon was always the stepping stage of western powers to interfere in the affairs of the Syrian hinterland. We can thus contextualize the various coups d'etats in Syria between 1949 and 1970. Every coup d'etat, starting with the one led by the commander of the army Hosni Zaim in 1949 till the one led by Hafez al-Assad in 1970, aimed to take over Damascus. The chances of every ruler to uphold power depended on his ability to control this metropolitan city.

Damascus has played a leading role in the Middle East since early history, as it was an important mercantile city in the trade of the region. During the Ottoman rule (1516-1918), the city was the entrance of the Sublime Porte to its Arab provinces. Throughout its history, Damascus was able to subordinate its rural hinterland due to its capability to monopolize administrative, judicial and commercial services. Pastoral nomads depended on the city as an outlet for their products, while villages depended on its protection, in addition to the economic and social services that it provided. This important role would be enlarged as Damascus would become the capital of

Syria, and eventually a cosmopolitan city. By the second half of the 19th century, the city had started to modernize, giving way to the rise of Arab nationalism. As Philip Khoury finds, "Damascus supplied a disproportionate share of the leading lights leading to the growth of Arab Nationalism in the 19th century and most important Arab nationalists emerged from one single class which is the landowning bureaucratic class that assumed shape in the late 19th century".[2] This made any political authority that wanted to rule Syria keen on acknowledging the economic privileges of the Damascene elite.

A Fragmented State?

WWI ended with the defeat of Germany, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire, and caused the latter to lose all its Arab possessions. The victorious powers, Great Britain and France, according to the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), divided the ex-Ottoman Arab provinces: Syria and Lebanon came under French colonial rule, while Iraq, Jordan and Palestine were taken by the British.[3] The French colonial policy in Syria and Lebanon was premised on its bias toward the Christians, especially the Maronites in Lebanon and the Catholics and Alawites in post-Ottoman Syria. In addition, the French perceived Syria as a society fragmented along ethnic, tribal, sectarian and regional lines. Hence, it created a Druze state in the southern part of Syria, an Alawi state on the coast, a Sunni state in Damascus, and another Sunni state in Aleppo. This "divide and rule" policy served the French's interests and plans in the region and inaugurated a new era in the history of Syria.[4] The struggle against the French mandate, led mainly by the Damascene elite, was able to reunite Syria in one state, and was eventually able to achieve the country's full independence from France in 1946.

The new state would be based on a leading role of Damascus, and would be subjected to the influence of three contending regional powers: Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. The north-eastern part of Syria, which included Al Hassaka, Al Qamishli, down to Al- Boukamal and the Euphrates in the east, was traditionally under the influence of Iraq. Aleppo had strong mercantile relations with Anatolia that were damaged by the creation of French Syria and hence favored an open relationship with Turkey. However, it was Ataturk's Turkey that deserted Aleppo and turned westward toward Europe. The Alawites of the coastal region had strong affiliations with the Alawites of East Anatolia, estimated around 15 million. In southern Syria, the Druze of mount Hauran had strong relations with the Hashimite Kingdom based on their traditional economic interests with Jordanian tribes. On the other hand, the Sunni majority of Hauran envied the Druze's amicable relations with Jordan, as the latter was their stepping stone to maintain their kin attachments with relatives in Arabia. The upper Damascene class established a partnership with the mercantile elite of Beirut, while the middle merchant class, upset by the French arrangements in the Levant, expressed its dissatisfaction with the French policy in Syria and tilted toward Arab Nationalism. Thus, the ambiguous historical trajectories and loyalties of the constituting Syrian regions and tribes did not produce a coherent national bonding that would eventually lead to a stable nation state. As Kautsky stated, "the frontiers that resulted from

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2 Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism-the Politics of Damascus 1860-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1983) 1.
3 Zeine Zeine, The *Struggle for Arab Independence* (Beirut: Khayat, 1960).
4 Michael Province, *The Great Syrian Revolt, and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 17.

colonialism created nation states in the legal sense but did not create nations".[5] Arab Nationalism as an ideology served to create a common identity for the Syrians, bypassing their tribal and regional sub-identities, and at the same time satisfying the tendency of particular regions to be affiliated with their neighboring geopolitical centers. Pan-Arabism became highly essential for the survival of Syria, which became the propagator of this ideology while considering that its national frontiers were temporary until the achievement of Arab unity. In my opinion, this had been the reason for the uneasiness of the Syrian Arab Nationalists with what they considered as artificial national frontiers.[6] This was also obvious in the Syrian constitution that asserted that the legitimacy of any government stems from its tendency to achieve Arab unity.[7] Hence, the mission of Syria goes beyond the artificial frontiers and Syrians are expected to fulfill their duty towards their Arab brothers to defend the Arab nation against foreign aggression and schemes.[8]

A System Designed for al-Assad?

During the 1950s a mounting competition occurred between Egypt and Iraq over control of Syria. This explained much of the political instability that prevailed in Syria prior to Hafez al-Assad, who became the undisputed master of the country in November 1970. Upon taking over power, he had to deal with a diversified socio-political map that had multiple implications on the formation of the Syrian society. Syria was a country where the rural population formed the majority, and the urban population formed a minority with a leading role to Damascus and Aleppo. The urban centers controlled the line extending from Deraa in the south to Aleppo in the north, and divided the country between a peasant-based countryside area in the west and coastal areas, and a Bedouin-populated countryside area that controlled the Syrian Desert and separated it from the Euphrates and Aljazira region in the east. In order to ensure its stability, every system had to tighten its grip on Damascus to control the center of Syria, and use the metropolitan city as a base from which it could establish an accurate balance between these geopolitical and demographic variations, also taking in consideration tribal, confessional and ethnic variations.

All rulers (mostly Generals of the army) had played off these contradictions, while tightening their grip on Damascus. All of them lost power when they lost the loyalty of the Damascene elite. For example, in 1958, the Damascene elite played an important role in forging unity with Egypt under Gamal Abdul Nasser (r. Egypt 1954-1970) (r. Syria 1958-1961). Three years later the same Damascene bourgeoisie turned against Nasser due to his socialist economic policies that damaged their interests. The officers that led the coup d'etat against union with Egypt were two Damascene officers; lieutenant colonel Abdul Karim al-Nahlawi, and major Haydar al-Kuzbari. Al-Nahlawi was the director of Marshal Abdul hakim Amer[9] Bureau in Damascus,

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5 Kautsky as cited in Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism:, A Critical Enquiry*(London: MacMillan Press, 1981), 19.
6 Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986, Politics and Society*, (London: Unwin Hyman Limited, 1st edition, 1988), 77.
7 R.D. Maclaurin, Muhammad Mughisuddin, and Abraham Wagner, *Foreign Policy Making in the Middle East, Domestic Influences on Policy in Egypt, Iraq and Syria*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 241.
8 Alasdair Drysdale, and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process*, (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1991), 54.
9 Abdul Hakim Amer was the commander in chief of the Egyptian army (r. 1954-1967). During Union between Egypt and Syria (United Arab Republic) he became the commander of both egyptian and Syrian armies and governor general of Syria that was considered as the northern District (al-Iqlim al-Shamali)

while al-Kuzbari was the commander of the border protection force stationed near Damascus. Another example; in February 1966, General Salah Jadid led a coup d'etat that rendered him master of Syria until 1970. Jadid followed a socialist agenda that nationalized too many private institutions. This damaged the interests of the Syrian bourgeoisie, and mainly the Damascene bourgeois class, which made it turn to his foe Hafez al-Assad.

The long period of al-Assad's rule was a result of his ability to tighten his control over Damascus by drawing an alliance with the Damascene mercantile elite, acknowledging their economic interests, and to manage such balance with high efficiency.[10]   When al-Assad confronted opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood between 1975 and 1981, which ended in a bloodbath in Hama in 1982, he was keen on keeping the damascene bourgeoisie loyal by raising its share of imports from about one billion Syrian Pounds in 1975 to 3.63 billion Syrian Pounds in 1976 and to about 4.17 billion Syrian Pounds in 1980, which contributed to neutralizing Damascus and preventing it from joining the insurgency of Hama.[11] Al-Assad had to ensure the stability of his regime, in order to maintain Syrian national interests by preventing or reducing regional and external interventions in the Syrian internal affairs. This stability enjoyed by the Syrians led to the transformation of Syria   to a regional power for the first time in its modern history.[12] On the regional level, al-Assad succeeded in normalizing relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which were strained during the 1960s when radical members were in control of the Baath party. The rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt served as a prelude to launching a war against Israel in order to regain the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in 1967, and to find a "just solution to the Palestinian cause".[13] In addition to that, al-Assad sought to limit Israel within its 1967 borders, since he felt that any "expansion of its influence would surely come at the expense of Syria".[14]

Regional developments during the 1970s and 1980s

Al-Assad believed that the 1973 war would improve the regional status of Syria and would lead to negotiations with Israel to regain the Golan Heights and end the Arab-Israeli struggle in a comprehensive way.[15] Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had the same objectives, which made him decide to coordinate his efforts with al-Assad to launch a simultaneous war on Israel. The war ended with limited military achievements for the Arab armies because Sadat decided to abruptly stop the attack. Israel seized the moment and focused its military efforts on Syria. These developments weakened the Arab stance vis-à-vis Israel and eventually led to unilateral peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel.[16] In 1979, Egypt signed the Camp David accords with Israel, which further weakened Syria vis-à-vis the latter.[17] In response, al-Assad adopted a new

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10 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).
11 Batatu, Hanna: Syria's peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics. p. 208.
12 Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, (London: Ib. Tauris, 1995), 4.
13 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Does Syria want Peace? Syrian Policy in the Syrian Israeli Peace Negotiations," *Journal of Palestine Studies, no. 101*, (Autumn 1996).
14 *Ibid.*
15 Patrick Seale, *Al Assad, Al Siraa Ala Al Sharq Al Awsat* (Al Muassassa Al Arabiya Lil Dirassat Wal Nashr, 1987), 319.
16 *Ibid.*
17 Jaafar Qassem Mohammad, *Souriya Wa Al Ittihad Al Sovieti, Dirasa fi Al Ilaqat Al Arabiya Al Sovietya*, (London: Dar Najib Al Rayyes, 1987), 50.

strategy that would lead to the formation of a coalition between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the PLO against Israel.[18] In 1975, a civil war broke out in Lebanon and two years after that, the al-Assad regime intervened under the pretext of ending this war. Hence, he was partially successful in extending his influence over this neighboring country, but was short of imposing his tutelage over the PLO and Jordan. Until the end of the Civil War (1975-1990), al-Assad was able to impose Syria as the major player in Lebanon. The biggest challenge to this influence came from Israel in 1982, when the Israeli army invaded South Lebanon, and eventually reached Beirut. As a result of this invasion, Israel's ally and commander of the Phalange armed forces Bashir Gemayel became President. Three weeks after being elected, Bashir was assassinated and was succeeded by his brother Ameen. In spite of the severe blow that Syria received, it was able in 1984 to reverse the situation to its favor by supporting various opponents to Gemayel.

In 1985, a radical change occurred in the Soviet Union; the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev to power constituted the first step towards the eventual collapse of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union in 1991. The United States took advantage of this situation to impose its influence over the oil-rich Middle East.[19] Iraq stood as an obstacle and had to be eliminated, something that the U.S. would achieve during the second Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait (August 1990-February 1991). In addition, establishing U.S. hegemony in the region would render it capable of obstructing the formation of a Eurasian bloc that could marginalize the United States, and obstruct its plans to be the major power in the world. In this regard, former American national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out in his book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And It's Geostrategic Imperatives* (translated into Arabic as *Ruq'at Al Shataranj Al Kubra*), that Eurasia is the key to control the world and the great battle for global domination would always hover around it.[20] He added that "the U.S. global hegemony would be achieved through the direct control of the Middle East".[21] By this, it would be possible to separate Europe from Africa, and to create a rift between Russia and Europe. This would also create an impregnable barrier against Russia's intentions to access the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and at the same time prevent China from accessing Africa. Brzezinski added that controlling the European part of Eurasia through oil and security could allow Washington to control Africa while the economic control over Russia would facilitate the control of Asia, and thus control Oceania and the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the North and South Poles.[22]

The Arabs were well aware of the serious effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union on them, which prompted Saddam Hussein in 1989 to declare that "the end of the Cold War was a disaster for the Arabs".[23] Those changes at the international level made al-Assad concerned about Syria, and convinced him that the Americans would dominate the world stage for the upcoming decade,[24] encouraging him to improve his relations with them and not to confront them in the Middle East.[25] That was the reason why he joined the international coalition to

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18 Ronald De McLaurin, Mohammed Mughisuddin, Abraham R. Wagner, *Foreign policy making in the Middle East: domestic influences on policy in Egypt, Iraq, Israel, and Syria* (Praeger Publishers Inc. 1977), 254

19 Samir Amin, "Ba'da Harb Al Khaleej, Al Haymana Al Amirkiya Ila Ayn?", *Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi,* No. 170, April 1993, 15.

20 Zbignew Brezhinski, *Ruq'at Al Shataranj Al Kubra*, tr. Amal Al Charfi, (Amman: Al Ahliya Lil Nashr, 1st ed., 1991), 12.

21 *Ibid.*, 47.

22 *Ibid.*, 48.

23 Peter Rodman, "Middle East Policy after the Gulf War", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, Spring 1991, 223.

24 Graham E.Fuller, "Moscow and the Gulf war", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, Spring 1991, 65.

25 Karawan, Ibrahim A., "Arab Dilemas in the 1990's: Breaking taboos and searching for signposts", *Middle East Journal*, vol.48, no.3 Summer 1994, 434.

liberate Kuwait in 1991. Syria was hoping that its attitude would contribute to its establishment as a partner of the United States in the Middle East, and its removal from the American blacklist, which would allow it to gain economic aid, and facilitate the transfer of U.S. technology to it. Syria received two billion dollars from Saudi Arabia and established a kind of alliance with Egypt and the Gulf States G.C.C. (Declaration of Damascus). In addition to that, the harmony with the United States allowed it to overthrow the rebel General Michel Aoun in Lebanon and to impose a settlement through what is known as the Taif Agreement.[26] Finally, Syria was not to oppose the peace process that was aimed at ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and at integrating Israel into the Arab region. The U.S. sponsored the peace negotiations between the Arabs and Israel (1991-1996). These peace talks were able to conclude a peace agreement between the P.L.O. and Israel in 1993, and between the latter and Jordan in 1994, but fell short of establishing peace between Syria and Israel.

The Dawn of the New Millennium

With the dawn of the new millennium, the Americans had to take a series of crucial decisions that would once and for all put to rest the matter of their undisputed global leadership. The war on Afghanistan in autumn 2001 was a chance for the U.S. to delineate the maximum extent to which it could control the Middle East. In addition, the war on Iraq would form an opportunity for the U.S. to give it depth in the Middle East as well as control the oil supplies. The next step would be toppling the regime in Iran and Syria in order to fully control the Middle East. The goals of the two color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were to control the flanks of the U.S. frontier in the Middle East. In May 2000, Israel had withdrawn from south Lebanon in order to close down the last Arab war front against it. This would deprive the Lebanese Resistance of its raison d'etre and would pave the way for U.N. resolution 1559 which would be forged four years later and would demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. A few months after the Israeli withdrawal, the Maronite Patriarchal Council issued a call on the Syrian government to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. That coincided with the Lebanese parliamentary elections that were held according to the legislative law forged by Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri and supported by the head of the Syrian security services in Lebanon, Ghazi Kenaan. This law would form the basis for an attack on Lebanese president Emile Lahhoud and on the preparations that Hafez al- Assad, who died a few months prior to these elections, had secured for a transition of power to his son Bashar. In June 2004, French President Jacques Chirac and American President George W. Bush agreed on sharing influence in the Middle East, which culminated in the Security Council resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon.

It was Rafiq Hariri who had worked hard in secret to have the resolution issued.[27] France had chosen to no longer confront the U.S., but to assist American policies in the Middle East. According to French journalist Vincent Nouzille, the reason was that France, when it had opposed the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, was counting on the Iraqi resistance to last for several months, which would embarrass the U.S. and push it to seek France's help "to get out of

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26 Atherton Alfred Leroy, "The Shifting Sands of the Middle East Peace", *Foreign Policy*, no.83, Spring 1992, 129.

27 Richard LaBeviere, *Al Tahawoul Al Kabir* (*The Great Transformation*), (Baghdad-Beirut: Dar Al Farabi, 2008), 92-93.

that bloodbath".[28] However, the Americans were able to achieve quick success and to topple Saddam Hussein after three weeks of battle, and President George Bush attempted to isolate Chirac on the international arena.[29] Yet What helped Chirac was the increase of the Iraqi resistance operations against the U.S. occupation, which pushed Bush to seek Chirac's aid in an attempt to widen international support to the Americans in Iraq. The U.S. was convinced that it could benefit from France by including it in its plans for the Middle East in return for a partial French influence in Syria and Lebanon.[30] Chirac had supported Bashar al-Assad in seizing power in Syria in 2000, thinking that he could put him under his tutelage and convince him to withdraw from Lebanon and break his ties with Iran, however, he was disappointed.[31] Syria's reaction to the 1559 UN resolution was to extend the presidency of its ally Emile Lahhoud by three years, and to replace Hariri by another Sunni ally, namely Omar Karami as Prime Minister. On February 14, 2005 Hariri was assassinated and the West blamed Syria for the act.

Turkey as a new regional power

The U.S. victory in Afghanistan and especially Iraq was inconclusive. The American army met fierce resistance in both countries. Syria and Iran had supported the Iraqi resistance and made the American occupation costly. Russia also backed countercoups that beleaguered President Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia and removed Viktor Yuchinko in Ukraine. The Americans became aware of their limitations under Obama. They therefore pushed for a political agreement with a pro-American Iraqi government which would ease the pressure off them so that they could focus on tightening their grip on Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran took advantage of the American faltering to exert its influence in a number of strategic positions such as in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in Gaza through Hamas, and in Yemen through the Houthis. Once again the U.S. would take advantage of history. From the 16th through the 19th centuries, Shiite Iran and Sunni Ottoman Empire were reciprocally containing each others.

In Turkey, new political developments announced the breakaway from the secular legacy established by Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. This breakaway had many causes, the most important of which was the failure of Turkey to join the European Union. The main issue that the Islamists raised was embracing Turkey's Islamic past and reincorporating their country into the Islamic world. It was the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who drew the outlines of the new Turkish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. In his opinion, there were three pillars of the Turkish national security. Turkey should abandon the policy adopted by secularists since Ataturk to withdraw behind its borders, and should follow a more dynamic foreign policy.[32] Turkey had to defend Istanbul from the shores of the Adriatic and thus it had to strengthen its ties with Kosovo and Bosnia, while using Albania as a base from which to extend Turkish influence into the Balkans.[33] Davutoglu also saw that the defense of eastern Anatolia was not limited to the borders with Armenia and Iran but extended to the western coast of the Caspian Sea, and thus

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28 Vincent Nouzille, *Dans le Secret Des Presidents*, (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 395-408.
29 *Ibid.*, 409-419.
30 *Ibid.*, 444-449.
31 *Ibid.*, 450-451.
32 Ahmet Davutoglu, Al Umq Al Istratiji (Strategic depth: Turkey's position and role on the international arena). Tr. to Arabic by Mohammad Thalgi and Tarek Abdeljalil, (Doha: El Dar Al Arabiyya lil 'Oloom Nasheroon, 2010), 75-81.
33 *Ibid.*, 146-150.

Azerbaijan would form a base from which Turkish influence could infiltrate the Caucasus.[34] He also believed that the security of southeastern Turkey did not stop at its border with Iraq and Syria but extended to the line stretching from Karkuk and Mosul in northern Iraq to Aleppo in northern Syria, indicating that the Middle East formed the backyard of Turkey.[35] Syria was the gate from which Turkey could return to the Middle East. Ankara used the faltering peace talks between Damascus and Tel Aviv to establish itself as a mediator between Syria and Israel.

The Arab Spring

In January 2011 protests erupted in Egypt against President Hosni Mubarak. It was the toppling of the Tunisian President Zeinelabidin Bin Ali on the 14th of January 2011 by popular protests that encouraged the Egyptian youths to organize themselves and take to the streets demanding the abdication of Mubarak. A few weeks later, protests broke out in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. These events forced the U.S. to rearrange its plans mainly to minimize the damage to the American strategic interests. The Syrian demonstrators had strong motives for their discontent with the regime. After five decades of the rule of the Baath Party, the Syrians were fed up with the rampant corruption and nepotism, and the lack of civil and political liberties. After a decade in power, Bashar al-Assad attempted to reform the regime, but the turnout was limited. He introduced a set of economic liberal reforms that benefited the upper class, and mainly those who were close to the regime. In addition, he opened the market for imports, mainly from Turkey, at the expense of local economy. This undermined the support for the regime among lower middle classes and rural areas, which made it turn against the Syrian government.

The U.S., along with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported and financed the neo-alafi groups who were part of the demonstrations that erupted in Syria and highlighted a sectarian discourse exemplified, by the attack of one Salafi sheikh in Deraa city on the Druze.[36] They provoked a wave of anti-minorities hate campaign that targeted the Shiites, Alawites and Christians.[37] It is suffice to remember that the southern Syrian city of Deraa is the major city in Hauran which forms a natural geographical extension of Jordan, and consequently it is open to socio-political effects coming from the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, the Lebanese March 14th political coalition, dominated by the Sunni-based Future Movement supported in funds and arms the insurgency in Syria. This movement, led by the Lebanese ex-prime minister Saad Hariri, had large followers in Sunni areas like Akkar in northern Lebanon, in central and southern Bekaa, and in the coastal cities. The northern part of Lebanon became the hotbed for the neo-Salafis that provided a vital support for the Syrian rebels. The Lebanese military intelligence arrested four people who were smuggling weapons into Syria, and a boatload of arms was intercepted on its way from Tripoli to the Syrian coast.[38] Simultaneously, the Kurds of Iraq encouraged their brethren in Qamishli, Al Hasaka and Boukamal in northeastern Syria to rebel against the regime. Notably, the Syrian authorities intercepted loads of arms smuggled from Iraq to Syria.[39] Dayr El Zor, a city in eastern Syria, whose residents share familial ties with the people of central Iraq, also

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34 *Ibid.*, 150-155.
35 *Ibid.*, 155-158.
36 *Assafir Newspaper,* 21 June 2011
37 *Ibid.*
38 *Assafir Newspaper,* 15 May 2011, and *Assafir Newspaper,* 23 June 2011.
39 *Assafir Newspaper,* 18 April 2011.

witnessed demonstrations with the participation of neo Salafis. The U.S. saw in the protests an opportunity to exert pressure on Bashar al-Assad. President Barak Obama, in a speech on the Arab revolutions, called on Bashar al-Assad to 'lead the reforms in his country or resign' and moreover, he warned al-Assad that 'the quelling of the protests may lead to international intervention'.[40]

Turkey was one of the most affected nations by the explosive situation in Syria and called on the Syrian President to start a process of reforms that would lead to more political and civic rights after five decades of Baathist authoritarian rule. The Turkish minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, rushed to visit Syria and meet with president Bashar al-Assad at the beginning of the crisis to express his country's will to assist in this process.[41] It is important to mention that the first weeks of protests did not witness any significant political development in the Syrian cities and towns adjacent to the Turkish border. However, things began to change in May and June of 2011 as the Turkish P.M. Recep Tayyep Erdogan announced that "the horrors committed in Syria were inexcusable", calling for al-Assad to drop his brother Maher, whom he considered as "responsible for quashing the revolts". He went on to say that 'if those horrors were to continue, Turkey would not defend Syria against the pressures that would be exerted by the "international community".[42] Then Ahmet Davutoglu declared that al-Assad had one week to start with reforms, otherwise the international community would intervene in Syria.[43] Talks circulated about the intention of Turkey to impose a "security zone" in northern Syria echoing the geostrategic interests set by Davutoglu in his book, as abovementioned.[44] Afterwards, tension in northern Syria started to escalate with the events in Jisr Al-Shoghoor, where armed groups killed 120 security personnel. The security zone in northern Syria, suggested by Davutoglu, copied the late security zone established by the ex-Turkish president Turgut Ozal the early 1990s to fight the Kurdish Labor Party (P.K.K.) insurgents. It was clear that the Turkish officials were looking to play a role in the Arab World by intervening in Syria in a way consistent with the American strategic policy in the Middle East. That strategy aimed to expand the Turkish influence southwards to connect with Jordan and the Persian Gulf, so that the Mediterranean coast would be closed to any Iranian, Russian or Chinese infiltration. This strategy has also meshed with the French policy, which was based on France's traditional drive to control the Syrian coastal region. This, in my opinion, explains the French foreign ministry's call on the United Nations and the European Union to impose sanctions on Syrian officials, a call that was adopted by Portugal, Britain, and Germany.[45]

Al-Assad Supporters

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40 "Barack Obama's speech on Middle East – full transcript", *The Guardian,* May 19, 2011 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/19/barack-obama-speech-middle-east (accessed on July 25, 2012)
41 "Ankara envoy supports Damascus reforms," *Now Lebanon*, April 6, 2011, http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=258511 (accessed on July 25, 2012)
42 *Assafir* June11, 2011
43 *Ibid.*
44 *Assafir Newspaper,* 17 June 2011.
45 Louis Charbonneau, "EU powers push U.N. council to condemn Syria: envoy", *Reuters*, April 25 2011. *http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/25/us-syria-un-idUSTRE73O49Q20110425*. (accessed on July 25, 2012)

President Bashar al-Assad encountered major western pressures. However, there were other regional and international players that expressed their support to the regime. Iran was the primary power that unconditionally backed the Syrian regime, which supported Iran during the devastating Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). The Iranian-Syrian alliance started with the late Hafez al-Assad, who built a strong alliance with Imam Khomeini. This alliance had given Iran a significant access to the Arab Middle East and, via Syria, granted Iran a strategic position on the Mediterranean while the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon provided it with a major part in the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Iran, the possibility of losing Syria, at a time when the west was attempting to lay siege on Iran, meant that Washington and its allies could increase the pressures on Tehran to destabilize the Islamic regime which would also serve in locking China and Russia inside Asia, and prevent them from reaching the open seas and the maritime trade routes. This in part explains the announcement of the Iranian foreign ministry that the events in Syria "were part of a western conspiracy to destabilize a government that supported resistance against Israel".[46] Tehran then expressed its opposition to "any foreign intervention in Syrian affairs",[47] and objected to western accusations that Iran was assisting Syrian security forces in suppressing the demonstrations.[48] This was clear in the stance of Hezbollah expressed by its general secretary Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah,[49] who stated that losing the Syrian support to the armed resistance to Israel would mean the destruction of the Islamic Resistance.

Russia is the second supporter to al-Assad regime. The calls for changing the Syrian regime would also mean that Moscow would lose an important ally in the Middle East. Russia's relationship with Damascus had formed the cornerstone of the Russian strategy in the region since the early 1950s, that offered Russia an important naval base on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, something it had aspired to achieve since the days of Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725). Prior to the escalation in Syria, Russia had expressed its resentment against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which pushed for an international resolution to protect the civilians in Libya (as Muammar Gaddafi's (r.1969-2011) forces were cracking down on civilians), and then used it, according to Russia, as an excuse for military intervention in Libya. Noting that Moscow had favorable relations with Tripoli, the fall of Gaddafi was considered a severe blow to its vital interests in the Mediterranean. In order to prevent the repetition of the Libyan scheme, Russia severely voiced its intent to oppose any international resolution against Syria. It told the Syrian opposition groups that had visited Moscow that Russia would oppose any international intervention and any destabilization of the regime while encouraging the opposition to start talks with the Syrian regime. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, conveyed Russia's staunch opposition any condemnation of the Syrian regime in the U.N. Security Council.[50] Losing Syria totally to the west meant that the Middle East would be closed to the Russians, and therefore the U.S. can use Turkey to infiltrate the Caucasus and central Asia.

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46 "Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson blames conspirators for Syria's protests", *Now Lebanon* April 12, 2011

http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=260937. (accessed on July 25, 2012)

47 *Assafir Newspaper,* 10 June 2011.

48 *Assafir Newspaper,* 15 June 2011.

49 *Assafir Newspaper,* 26 June 2011.

50 *Assafir Newspaper,* 30 May 2011.

China is the third supporter of Syria. It opposed any international resolution against the Syrian regime. Historically, China tended to be withdrawn its own borders "because there was nothing that it needed from the outside world". Since early history, it was the Arab and Persian merchants who had gone to China. The latter had not left its borders except on two occasions; the first was when it had fallen under the Mongols whose desire to open trade routes with the external world pushed China out of its isolation. This resulted in the first instance of Eurasian unity starting from China. The second instance of Chinese adventurism came after the collapse of the Mongol rule in China when the Ming Dynasty took over power. Emperor Zhu Di (r. 1402-1424) sent out a naval fleet that sailed around the world in 1421 before returning to China. Acting on imperial orders, the fleet was dismantled because "the world had nothing that China needed" and the Asian empire returned to its isolation.[51] This insularity was what gave the western powers the opportunity to besiege the greatest power in the early modern times and to transform it into Asia's "sick man" in the nineteenth century. Nowadays, China no longer has the luxury of secluding itself from the rest of the world because its economy requires foreign oil and markets for its products.

Speculation about the fall of al-Assad meant that Iran would be significantly weakened. Therefore, the Middle East would be closed to Russia, China and Iran. With Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, strengthening their ties to the U.S., China's venturing into the high seas would be difficult without American consent. No world power with aspirations for playing an international role would accept that its routes be under the control of another power. Therefore, China's connections with the world would be through the Middle East, exactly the case with the Mongols who had conquered China in the 13th century. It was through the Middle East that China could reach Africa, needed for its rich natural resources. This would explain the good relations between China and Sudan, the former's gateway to Africa, which would put extra emphasis on the necessity of Syria's independence from the West. Hence we can understand the reasons why China's foreign ministry declared that "Syria is a very important nation in the Middle East and it has to remain stable, and all problems have to be resolved internally without any external intervention that would lead to complications".[52]

Like Father Like Son?!

Bashar al-Assad built upon the legacy established by his father by tightening his grip over Damascus while playing on the contradictions between major superpowers to resist pressures on the Syrian regime. Until June 2012, Damascus was not touched by the insurgency, except for few explosions, and few pro al-Assad demonstrations. Aleppo, the capital of northern Syria also showed reservations on joining the insurgency. This provided al-Assad the possibility to rely on a solid base, while playing on internal and external contradictions. Hence, he was able to benefit from the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese support to withstand Western, Turkish, and Arab pressures. Then, he rushed to issue a series of decrees that aimed at containing the internal protests. His advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, announced on the 24th of March his intent to introduce political reforms that included the end of the state of emergency in effect in Syria since 1963. These decrees, initially, promised to combat and allowed the establishment of new parties, and

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51 Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, (London: Bantam Press, 2003).
52 *Assafir Newspaper*, May 13 2011

gave more freedom to the media and press. In addition, it provided an increase in the salaries of the employees of the public sector, and promised to open new jobs in the state bureaucracy.[53] This was followed by releasing hundreds of prisoners, including a significant number of Islamists.[54] One decree granted the Syrian citizenship to thousands of Kurds.[55] Another one formed a new government, with a social welfare agenda, which reflected the intentions to eliminate the economic liberal reforms introduced by the government of Mohammad Naji Otari (r. 2003-2011) and his Deputy Abdullah al-Dardary.[56] Other decrees re-allowed women wearing the Islamic dress (niqab) to teach in public schools,[57] cancelled the state security supreme court,[58] and passed a new electoral law that promised to allow more political rights.[59]

Externally, al-Assad used the Alawi and Kurdish groups inside Turkey to put pressure on Erdogan. It is estimated that the Kurds in Turkey form 20% of the eighty million inhabitants and are concentrated in the areas of Diyarbakir and other regions in the eastern Anatolia while the Alawis are estimated to number around 15 million including Kurds, Arabs, and Turks. Turkey at the time was close to legislative elections which took place on the 10th of June and resulted in the victory of the Justice and Development Party with more than 50% of the electoral vote and with 3% more than the percentage it got in the previous elections. However, this increase did not reflect in the number of seats the party got in Parliament, which went down from 331 to 326. Erdogan was in need of 331 seats in order to introduce amendments to the constitution. Most of the Alawis had voted for the Republican People's Party, the largest opposition party, and the far-right National Movement Party where the former garnered 26% of the votes and the latter around 13.2% while the number of members of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party rose to 36.[60] This outcome was serious because it obstructed Erdogan's efforts to transform the Turkish regime into a Presidential one which would give him a lot of privileges in the future if he ran for president. In addition, the elections results showed that the region of Eastern Anatolia had become in its majority against the Erdogan's Party, which reflected in itself the polarization of Turkish society. In Iraq, the resistance operations against U.S. occupation intensified, resulting in the death of 15 American soldiers in June 2011, the highest number of casualties among American troops since 2008.[61] Therefore, al-Assad appeared more confident and relaxed in his speech in front of the Syrian Parliament on the 20th of June 2011.[62] Yet the crisis was far from over as the conflict in Syria already acquired regional and international dimensions that would need regional and international powers to agree on a settlement in the country.

Epilogue

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53 *Assafir Newspaper,* 25 March 2011.
54 *Assafir Newspaper,* 28 March 2011.
55 *Assafir Newspaper,* 1 April 2011.
56 *Assafir Newspaper,* 4 April 2011.
57 *Assafir Newspaper,* 7 April 2011.
58 *Assafir Newspaper,* 22 April 2011.
59 *Assafir Newspaper,* 12 May 2011.
60 Jürgen Gottschlich, "Erdogan Falls Short of Goal in Turkish Elections-The AKP's Disappointing Victory", *Spiegel Online International*, June 13, 2011
http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-akp-s-disappointing-victory-erdogan-falls-short-of-goal-in-turkish-elections-a-768175.html. (accessed on July 25, 2012)

61 Tim Arango, "June Was Deadliest Month for U.S. in Iraq Since", *New York Times*, June 30, 2011
 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01baghdad.html?_r=1 (accessed on July 25, 2012)
62 *Assafir Newspaper*, 21 June 2011.

The Syrian insurgency was caused by many factors, whether local, regional, or international, which interacted to destabilize the Syrian regime. This rebellion was caused by the need of the Syrian people for economic, civic, and political rights, and it happened at a time when the whole Arab region was subject to drastic changes. The invasion of Iraq by the U.S. in 2003 and the political developments that followed, leading to the establishment of a new political order in that country and to the withdrawal of U.S troops by the end of the 2011 affected one geopolitical center that influenced northeastern Syria. The Egyptian revolution and the collapse of the Mubarak regime led to the weakness of one geopolitical center that influenced southern Syria, at a time when Turkey was redefining its role in the Arab world by considering that Syria should fall within its sphere of influence, which had its impact on northwestern Syria. These regional developments were occurring at a time when the U.S. was getting prepared to face the potential challenge to its global hegemony posed by Russia, China and Iran. In response, it got into an alliance with the European Union and Turkey while focusing its attention on controlling the Middle East. All these factors led to the disruption of the regional and international balance that Syria had benefited from since the days of Hafez al-Assad to impose stability.

Bashar al-Assad, until June 2012, was able to prevent being toppled like what happened to Zeinelabedin Bin Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. The two major factors that allowed him to survive until then were his ability to keep in control of Damascus, and his reliance on the conflict of interest between the U.S., E.U., and Turkey on one side and Russia, China, and Iran on the other. Russia and China were to block the western effort to issue U.N. resolutions that would allow military intervention in Syria by using the veto for three times, the last of which was in July 19, 2012.[63] Yet the biggest challenge to Bashar came on Wednesday July 18, 2012 when top Syrian officials were killed in a blast as they held a meeting of the "crisis cell", formed as a reaction to the insurgency. Among the killed were the minister of Defense Dawood Rajha, his second in command Assaf Shawkat (he was also the brother in law of Bashar), the assistant vice President Hassan Turkmani, and the Director of the National Security Bureau Hisham Ikhtyar.[64] At the same time, thousands of insurgents attacked various parts of the capital and the grip of the Syrian regime on Damascus seemed about to falter.[65] Though the Syrian army was able to recapture most quarters that were lost to the insurgents, tens of thousands of Damascenes left the city in a mass exodus to Lebanon.[66]

After almost 19 months, the Damascene mercantile elite seemed to have endured a lot of economic losses, which might play a role in making it withdraw its support for the al-Assad regime. The Syrian authorities need to reassert its control over the city not only on the military level, but also on the socio-economic level. Al-Assad needs to rehabilitate the support to his regime among the Damascene elite, which was weakened due to the crisis. For losing control of Damascus would deprive the Syrian regime of its solid base from which it could direct policies aimed at playing on the contradictions between various Syrian social groups, regions, and ethnicities, and between various regional and international powers in a way that ensures its survival. However, stability will be re-imposed in Syria only if the regional and international

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63 *Assafir Newspaper,* 20 July 2012.
64 *Assafir Newspaper*, July 19 2012.
65 Ibid
66 *Assafir Newspaper*, July 21 2012.

powers, competing over influence in Syria, would get into a compromise, otherwise the crisis would last for a long period.