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**The Syrian Revolution
– The Failure of the Struggle for Social Justice and Freedom**

Abstract

The Arab Spring in Syria led to protests and then to a violent uprising against the rule of al-Assad. Today, the erupted civil war continues. This article analyses the reasons behind the revolt, the regime and the other parties involved in it, strategies and short- as well as long term objectives for the various sides, and, the role of both the civil population and foreign powers.

Keywords: Syria, civil-war, Arab Spring, Al-Asad-Regime, uprising, factions, strategies, Islamists

In March 2011 the Arab Spring arrived in Syria. Overnight the flames spread all over the country, and Syria was cast into an internal conflict. Its beginning was limited to protest activities, but these developed into a popular revolt and, ultimately, a full-fledged civil war. As soon as the disorders began the regime responded with an iron fist, but it was unable to suppress the rebellion, which spread and took root among large segment of the Syrian society all over the country. The regime managed, however, to survive the first waves of protest, maintaining its cohesion and keeping its grip on the institutions of the state and the military.

Thus, as events unfolded Syria sank into a treacherous swamp of violent and bloody conflict. As the struggle proceeded, Syrian society broke down step by step into its component parts, along the fault lines that were already in existence in the country before the creation of the Syrian state. These fault lines separated geographical regions, ethnic and religious communities, and tribes and families. An even more divisive factor emerged as Syria turned into an arena for the struggle of radical Islamists dedicated to

jihād. Young volunteers from all over the Arab and Muslim world flowed into the country with the aim of fighting the heretical Alawite regime with its headquarters in Damascus.

As a result, the Syrian state has been plagued and de facto disintegrated into a number of state-like entities. ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria led by Abū Bakr al-Baġdādī, rules in eastern Syria and western Iraq; What used to be Syria under the Al-Asad dynasty in Western Syria, and Autonomous enclaves ruled by rebel groups hover on the edges of this territory, the most outstanding being the An-Nuṣra Front (or Ġabhat an-Nuṣra, “The Support Front for the People of Syria”), established by Al-Qāʿida. Finally in the northern and eastern parts of Syrian territory there is a Kurdish enclave.

Thus, the outbreak of the “Syrian spring” heralded the end of the lengthy era of over forty years when Syria was perceived as a stable state with a strong regime and the ability to play an active and even major role in the areas beyond its borders. All at once the Syrian state was thrown into a condition of instability and uncertainty. This made possible the renewal of the historical “struggle for Syria,” internally over who would rule and externally over which foreign actors would gain influence and exploit the country’s weaknesses. This situation signified a return to the unhappy past, to the first quarter of a century of the Syrian state’s existence, which was characterized by structural and political weakness and instability, frequent changes of regime, and foreign intervention in Syria’s affairs.¹

The Arab Spring Reaches Syria

In December 2010 the Arab Spring broke out, at first in Tunisia, and from there the flames spread to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. At first Syria looked on from the sidelines, and it seemed as if the wave of revolutions would bypass it. However, the march of history could not be stopped or diverted. At the end of the Friday prayer services in the mosques on 18 March 2011, demonstrations began in several Syrian cities, including Hama, Aleppo, and Banyas. During the demonstrations the call for “liberty” (*ḥurriyya*) was heard, but the crowd refrained from calling for the downfall of the regime – *isqāt an-niẓām*, “Down with the regime” – the cry that later became the demonstrators’ main slogan. A big demonstration also took place in Darʿa. Several thousand persons took part in this demonstration, which quickly got out of control. In the clashes with the security forces sent out against the demonstrators, two of the latter were killed. Three more were killed the next day during the funeral for the previous day’s victims.² Since then Syria has known no peace.

¹ For more on the Syrian revolution see Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, Stanford University, Stanford 2012. For more on Syrian history and the struggle for Syria see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria, A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1965; idem, *Asad of Syria, the Struggle for the Middle East*, I. B. Tauris, London 1988.

² See *al-Jazira* TV Channel, 18. 19 March 2011; Reuters, 18, 21 March 2011.

When the demonstrations first broke out in Syria, it appeared as if they would be much less extensive than those in Egypt. While hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people were taking to the streets in Cairo and other Egyptian cities, only hundreds or at most several thousand demonstrators took part in the Syrian disturbances. Even more important was the fact emphasized by news correspondents, commentators, and scholars, namely, that the demonstrations were confined to periphery areas, at first to the town of Darʿa in the south and the small towns and villages nearby. From there disturbances spread to the rural areas around Damascus. The turmoil reached the capital itself, with its millions of inhabitants, only after several months. However, something here should sound quite incongruous to anyone familiar with the recent history of Syria. It was precisely the peripheral areas of Syria that had constituted the stronghold and perhaps the source of power of the Baʿt Party and the Baʿt regime after it was established by the revolution of 8 March 1963.³

Clearly, something has changed. The Syrian periphery that gave the Baʿt Party its support over the years, and from which the Baʿt regime drew its strength, and its leaders as well, had turned its back on the regime. This circumstance is the culmination of a long process, extending over several decades, during which the regime allowed the support it enjoyed among the popular bases to decline and dissipate. The Baʿt Regime that was established following the 8 March Revolution, and even more, following the November 1970 seizure of power by Ḥafīz al-Asad (The Corrective Movement – *Al-Ḥaraka at-Taṣḥīhiyya*), reflected accurately the changes that were occurring during the 1950s and 1960s in Syria’s social realities. The new regime gave expression to the significant transformation that had taken place in the country, the main element of which was the emergence into the center of the political stage of the minority religious communities and the Sunni Muslim residents of the Syrian periphery. Since the 1960s and 1970s Syria has changed yet again, but the regime and the Baʿt Party have not shown themselves politic enough to adapt to this evolving reality.⁴

However, with the passage of the years, and especially from the beginning of the 2000s, it seemed as if the Syrian regime had ceased reflecting Syrian society. It even seemed as if it had turned its back on the Sunni population in the villages and peripheral areas that had until then been its own flesh and blood. During the second half of the first decade of the 2000s Syria experienced one of the worst droughts the state had ever known. The damage done by the drought was felt most intensely in the Ġazīra region of northeastern Syria and in the south, especially in the Ḥawrān region and its center, the city of Darʿa. In addition, these regions were adversely affected by the government’s economic policies, which aimed at changing the character of the Syrian economy from a socialist orientation into a “social market economy.” The aim of the latter was to open Syria to the world economy, encourage foreign investment, and promote activity

³ See “Al-Sharq al-Awsat” (London), 7 April 2011; *Al-ʿArabiyya* TV Channel, 6, 7 April 2011. See also *Syria Comment*, www.Joshualandis.com/blog.

⁴ See Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

in the domestic private sector as well.⁵ The conclusion to be drawn from all this was that while the Syrian regime did indeed manage to preserve its image of strength and solidity during the first decade of the 2000s, in actual fact its base of support was considerably narrowed. It lost the broad popular support that it had enjoyed among the Sunni village and periphery populations after it turned its back on them.

From Protest to Revolution and from Revolution to Civil War

In Tunis and Egypt the Arab Spring uprising was resolved soon after the outbreak of demonstrations on the streets of the big cities of Tunis and Cairo. In Libya and Yemen the uprisings spread rapidly to all parts of each country. In contrast to these other Arab states, the events in Syria unfolded slowly and gradually, with ups and downs, condemning the country and its inhabitants to an intractable, long-drawn-out, and extremely bloody conflict. It is difficult to point to any one dramatic event that heralded a turning point in the Syrian *intifāda* or a passage from one stage to the next. What one witnessed was Syria's slow and prolonged descent into a treacherous swamp from which it found it difficult to extricate itself. Several stages should however be mentioned in this connection:

The first stage – In its initial months, the uprising was limited to large demonstrations in peripheral towns and the countryside, with scant protests in some of the larger cities. These demonstrations nearly ceased following the regime's massive and brutal use of the military to forcefully suppress them.

The second stage, which began in summer 2011, was characterized by the expansion of the protests to the medium sized central cities, Hama and Homs, and to the outskirts of Damascus and Aleppo. At the same time, armed groups, some of them defectors from the military, began to operate against targets belonging to the Syrian regime, such as checkpoints, police stations and military bases.⁶

The third stage – at this point, since early 2012, the protest took on a new appearance. The strength of the rebels grew, and their ranks swelled to tens of thousands of armed men spread throughout the country, although they did not always operate under a united leadership. They took over large areas of the Syrian countryside, mostly in the east (the al Jazira area), the north (Idlib and areas outside of Aleppo), the Homs and Hama regions, and the agricultural areas of Damascus and Ḥawrān. Attacks on Syrian military units became more systematic, and efforts to take over the large urban centers got underway, first Homs and then Damascus and Aleppo. However, the Syrian military's success in forcing the rebels out of Damascus indicates that rebel forces are more like disorganized

⁵ See Eyal Zisser, *The Renewal of the "Struggle for Syria": The Rise and Fall of the Ba'th Party, Sharqiyya* (fall 2011), pp. 21–29. See also For Economic Data, EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit), *Syria – Country Report*, April 2011.

⁶ See *Syria Comment*, www.Joshualandis.com/blog. See also See "Al-Hayat" (London), 20 April, 13 August 2011; 19, 24 July 2012.

irregulars than a proper army, even if they include defectors from the Syrian military. They are not yet capable of conducting a large-scale military campaign, but rather only specific, local attacks on limited targets. On the other hand, the Syrian army clearly failed to suppress and defeat these rebels.⁷

The unfolding events in Syria can be viewed in two different ways:

On the one hand, they mark the ongoing and progressive dissolution and disintegration of Bašār al-Asad's Ba'ṭist regime, whose support, let alone legitimacy, is steadily dissipating. Some say that the continuation of this trend will inevitably bring the Syrian regime to its end sooner or later. On the other hand, the regime has not collapsed and still enjoys the support of the power bases that it has leaned on throughout the uprising: firstly, the coalition of minorities, including the Alawis, Druze and Christians, who amount to about one-third of Syria's population, and constitute an even larger proportion in the military. Secondly, the military and the government bureaucracy, which still stand by the regime, despite the growing trend of desertion: neither senior commanders nor any military units have dissolved or defected en masse, and tens of thousands of soldiers continue to fight the rebels.

The struggle in Syria thus turned into a war of attrition in which the side that survived and overcame its rival would be declared the winner. The rebels had a built-in advantage, since they were motivated by the impulse, and even passion, to bring about change, as well as a passion for revenge, and they had nothing to lose. However, it should also be remembered that the Syrian opposition was just a collection of tendencies and forces that found it difficult to join ranks and raise up an accepted and agreed-upon political and military leadership. In the field itself the armed groups acted with a certain degree of backing from the populations of the villages and slums at the edges of the big cities among whom they operated. However, they suffered greatly from their lack of heavy and advanced weapons, military skill, and a logistical infrastructure, and most of all, from the absence of a skilled and coordinated military command. The Syrian regime standing in opposition to the rebels was aware that it was fighting for its life. Supporting it was the social base that had always stood by its side. The implications of losing the present battle were clear to all the supporters of the regime, from President Asad on down to the lowest ranking soldier, and especially those who came from the Alawite community.

However, despite the structural weaknesses of the rebel groups, mainly the division and strife in their ranks and the fact that they had no central command or overall strategy, they progressed one step at a time – village by village, one district town and city after another – on the way to their goal. In early 2013, they gained control of large rural areas to the east and west of Damascus, thereby surrounding the capital. At the same time, the rebels consolidated their control of the rural areas around Homs and Hama, thereby threatening to divide Syria in two by cutting off the north of the country and

⁷ See *al-Jazira* TV channel, 6 June 2011. See also Radio BBC in Arabic, 12 February 2012. See also Aaron Lund, *Holy Warriors, A field Guide to Syria's Jihadi Groups*, "Argument", 15 October 2012.

the coastal region from Damascus. Their most important achievement, however, was in the spring of 2013, when they captured the city of Ar-Raqqa, the first city to fall into their hands. This city is the capital of the Ar-Raqqa district, the gateway to the al-Jazira region, which contains energy resources (oil and natural gas fields), water resources (the Asad dam and Lake Asad), and Syria's granaries, all of which are a major source of Syrian wealth.⁸

It appears that the fall of Ar-Raqqa in March 2013 sparked a major change in the regime's strategy, which abandoned its former tactics of locally based fighting for each village and town in a doomed effort to maintain control of the entire country. The regime's new strategy was based on several elements. First, the regime declared a de facto war of total destruction against its opponents aimed not only against the armed groups fighting on the battlefield, but also against the civilian population living in the rebel-controlled areas. It appears that the regime concluded that it would be difficult to defeat the rebellion without "dealing with" the civilian population providing cover, support, and a source of manpower for the rebels. In contrast to the past, when the regime confined itself to terrorizing the population into submission, the new practical meaning of such "treatment" was the "purification and cleansing" of entire areas of their residents.

The regime employed all its available weapons in this war of destruction, above all chemical weapons, consisting mostly of sarin gas. After being caught in the act and narrowly escaping a confrontation with the United States in late 2013 over its use of chemical weapons, the regime switched to use of chemical materials not included in the Chemical Weapons Convention, such as chlorine and gasoline bombs. The regime also made extensive use of advanced ground-to-ground missiles, such as Scud and M-600 missiles, amounting to half of Syria's missile arsenal before the outbreak of war, as well as warplanes, helicopters, and artillery. In addition to its use of firepower to weaken large areas and their population, the regime imposed a total blockade of these areas, sometimes in preparation for a military offensive. It cut off supplies of water and electricity, and prevented the free movement of people and goods, including the denial of food and medical aid. This policy led to the Syrian government being accused of systematic starvation of the country's population.⁹

The second strategic element comprised the efforts to maintain the regime's control of the Syrian heartland, which is essential for control of the country, instead of dispersing its forces to maintain control throughout the country, as in the past. This area centers on Damascus, ranges northward toward Aleppo, westward to the Syrian coast (where the Alawite community is concentrated), and southward to Dar'a, which controls the border

⁸ For the achievements of the rebels and the course of the war in the early years, see Eyal Zisser, *The Deadlocked Syrian Crisis: The Fable of the Ants and the Elephant*, "Strategic Assessment" 2013, 16, no. 2, pp. 35–45.

⁹ For reports of the Syrian regime's use of chemical and other weapons, see Rick Gladstone, *Claims of Chlorine-Filled Bombs Overshadow Progress by Syria on Chemical Weapons*, "New York Times", April 22, 2014. See also Fernande van Tets, *Hunger the Weapon of Choice for Syria's Assad Regime*, "Independent", October 30, 2013.

crossing from Syria to Jordan. A critical artery in the center of this area is the city of Homs in central Syria, which links Damascus to northern and coastal Syria. Adoption of this strategy meant that the regime was conceding, at least temporarily, its control of most of the rest of the country, most importantly the al-Jazira and Kurdish areas, the rural areas north of Aleppo and Idlib, and even the Dar'a rural area south of Damascus.

The third element is the increased reliance on foreign volunteers, mainly *Ḥizb Allāh* soldiers, as well as volunteers from within Syria, primarily from the Alawite community who were recruited into new militia frameworks established by the regime, such as the Popular Committees, the National Defense Force. No less significant was the arrival of thousands of trained and highly motivated soldiers sent by *Ḥizb Allāh* to fight in Syria alongside the regime. These soldiers began to arrive in the spring of 2013, first in the area of Homs and the town of Al-Quṣayr, and later in other areas as well, like the Qalamūn mountains, the Syrian Golan Heights and Aleppo in Idlib. These elite *Ḥizb Allāh* units, which fought for the Syrian regime as completely independent units, became more intensively involved in the fighting as the duration of their involvement turned into weeks and months.

Despite the regime's success in surviving and regaining the initiative, it is far from defeating those rebelling against it. The rebels have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to survive and rain unexpected and painful, albeit unfocused, blows on the regime. They have driven the regime out of eastern Syria, reappeared in the Qalamūn mountains and the rural areas around Damascus, consolidated their grip in the Syrian Golan Heights up to the Syrian-Israeli border, and even conducted surprise raids deep within the Syrian coastal area and toward the city of Ladhīqiyya. In March 2015 they were even able to capture Idlib, the second major city which fell into their hands since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution. The Syrian regime has not been able to defeat them, nor has it been able to break out from its stronghold in central Syria (Damascus, Hims, Aleppo, and Latakia), where it has consolidated its control. Moreover, only an ever-shrinking section of the population, consisting mainly of the Alawite minority, which constitutes 12 percent of the population and perhaps even less, is willing to fight and die for it.¹⁰

Throughout the long crisis, Bašār has demonstrated restraint with regard to his neighbors – Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, which is credited with a host of attacks in Syria. But domestically Bašār has shown forceful resolve. Perhaps unconsciously or unintentionally, and rather the result of the brutalization of the battles, he has turned the war he is waging on his enemies into a war of extermination, designed to annihilate or exile the rebels and their supporters. The result of Bašār's campaign is that four to six million Syrians have become refugees, some of them beyond Syria's borders. This

¹⁰ See: *Does the Fall of al-Raqqa Constitute a Turning Point in the Syrian Revolution?*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha, Qatar), Policy paper, March 24, 2013, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/80f489f5-ab59-4cdd-9a6e-8a2b74b35d41>. For the achievements of the Syrian regime in regaining control of various areas of the country during May, see Reuters, 19–20 May, 5 June 2013.

represents 20–30 percent of the population, comprising Sunnis from the periphery which was the home of the rebels and their primary support base.¹¹

The crisis that erupted in the summer of 2013 over the use of chemical weapons against regime opponents on August 21 was a good illustration of this dynamic. Indeed, on the way to victory, Al-Asad appeared to have hit a bump in the road in the form of Barack Obama and the United States, which appeared determined, on the face of things, to strike Asad for using chemical weapons on 21 August 2013 against his opponents, in the area of Al-Ġuṭa aš-Šarqiyya, on the rural outskirts of eastern Damascus, killing more than 1,400 civilians including women and children. For a brief moment it seemed that Bašār's fate was sealed and Washington was determined to act, perhaps even to topple him. But a compromise proposed by Russia and accepted by Bašār rescued him, albeit at the loss of some prestige and worse, the loss of his strategic assets, i.e., the chemical weapons caches. But Bašār, like his father before him, differed from Ṣaddām Ḥusayn who placed an all-or-nothing bet in order to avoid losing face.¹² Thus, Bašār saved his skin and bought valuable time for his real fight: not against the United States or Israel but against his enemies at home.

The unexpected collapse of the Iraqī army in early June 2014 in northern Iraq, and the fall of the Syrian regime's strongholds and enclaves in eastern Syria in July-August 2014, the threat of a radical Islamic area stretching from the outskirts of Baghdad to the outskirts of Aleppo, and the declaration by Al-Baġdādī in early July 2014 of the formation of a Muslim caliphate in this region under his leadership, followed by a declaration in early September 2014 by the leader of Ġabhat an-Nuṣra, Abū Muḥammad al-Ġawlānī, of the establishment of an Islamic Emirates in the territories under his control, have given the rebels a boost in their struggle against the Al-Asad regime. ISIS's importance lies in the fact that it is the first organization fighting the regime to establish itself as a realistic alternative to Al-Asad. ISIS has consolidated itself as a governing entity with government systems and economic, social, and legal services, however basic and primitive they may be. It has succeeded in unifying under its banner – admittedly through the use of threats and violence – a large part of the armed groups that have been operating in Syria until now. It has thereby succeeded where all the opposition groups that arose during the years since the revolution began in Syria have failed. At the same time, it has exacerbated the tensions between the various opposing groups in the rebel ranks, and more importantly, has generated renewed international legitimacy for the Asad regime.¹³

¹¹ For more on the Human tragedy in Syria see the *Syria Comment* blog by Prof. Joshua Landis of Oklahoma University, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog>, and the *Syrian Revolution Digest* blog by Syrian expatriate intellectual Ammar Abdulhamid, <http://www.syrianrevolutiondigest.com>. See also Keith Proctor, "Inside Syria's Siege Economy," *CNN*, May 8, 2013. For estimates of the numbers of fatalities and refugees, see *Reuters*, May 14, 2013.

¹² See Peter Baker, *A Rare Public View of Obama's Pivots on Policy in Syria Confrontation*, "The New York Times", 11 September 2013.

¹³ For more about the Islamic front and its platform, see the al-Jazeera television station on November 7, 23, and 26, 2013. See also "As-Safir" (Beirut), November 8 and 26, 2014, and "Al-Monitor", *The Rise of the Islamic Front is a Disaster for Syria*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.comurity/2014/05/syria-dispute>.

In any case, the appearance of ISIS and Ḥizb Allāh’s increasing involvement in the fighting in Syria are two sides of the same coin, and highlight a new aspect of the war in Syria. This war has gradually turned into a war between armed gangs. The gangs fighting on the regime’s side (i.e., on the side of what remains of the regular Syrian army) consist mainly of groups of volunteers from the Alawite minority recruited by the regime to fight for it and Ḥizb Allāh soldiers. The rebel camp is composed of various armed groups, some of which are based on Arab and other Muslim volunteers streaming into the country from all over the Arab and Muslim world.

Furthermore, the revolution of the Syrian masses who went into the streets of rural towns and villages demanding justice and freedom has become a bloody civil war, and even worse, has been taken over by radical Islamic groups with no connection to the Syrian state and society. These groups seek an Islamic caliphate like that envisioned by Abū Bakr al-Bağdādī, or Muslim emirates like the one advocated by Muḥammad al-Ġawlānī, and the Syrian masses are therefore no longer involved in the revolt. Consequently, revolutionary enthusiasm has faded, with feelings of revenge giving way to fatigue and exhaustion and, inevitably, a desire for an end to war at all costs, even renewed allegiance to the Syrian regime or, alternatively, acceptance of ISIS rule.

In view of this situation, a change in the international community’s attitude to the crisis in Syria is emerging, even among the rebels’ formerly most enthusiastic supporters. For example, in the summer of 2013, CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell stated on the occasion of his retirement that the civil war in Syria had become the greatest threat to the security of the US, while the Iranian nuclear question was at most a source of concern.¹⁴ Later, when the US began to assemble an international coalition against ISIS, it refused to include Al-Asad’s Syria, and even asked moderate rebels for help in a two-sided struggle against both ISIS and Bašār al-Asad, but it was clear to everyone that such a policy was useless, given the absence of a moderate alternative to ISIS among the rebels.

To conclude

Four years since the eruption of the Syrian revolt, Bašār al-Asad succeeded in ensuring the survival of his rule in the central region of Syria and its heartland (the Damascus-Aleppo axis and the Alawite coast). It also appears that many people inside and outside Syria believe that his victory, or at least his survival in power, is the only remaining hope and guarantee for the preservation of the unity of Syria as a country and its existence as a sovereign state. At the same time, the rebels are still exacting a toll from the regime, and during the summer of 2014, ISIS sprang from their ranks as a leading element among the rebels and poses an alternative to the Syrian regime

¹⁴ For Michael Morell’s statement, see *CIA Official Calls Syria Top Threat to US Security*, “Wall Street Journal”, August 6, 2013.

in the regions where it holds sway, and where it is difficult to envision any local party whatsoever being capable of uprooting it. Other groups, led by Ġabhat an-Nuṣra took over main parts of Western Syria, including most of the Syrian Golan Heights in the south and the city off Idlib in the north. As a result, Syria has been effectively bisected into the east of the country, which is currently part of the ISIS caliphate, and the center and west of the country, still held by the regime but also containing rebel enclaves, from the Kurdish enclave in the north and east of the country to enclaves of opposition soldiers in western Syria, some of these being large autonomous areas beyond the regime's control. Whether Al-Asad manages to defeat his opponents, or whether the rebels are successful, the winner or winners in the struggle are liable to discover that very little is left of Syria – a country that only a few short years ago was regarded as a paragon of stability, with a strong and invulnerable regime.

Indeed, The Al-Asad dynasty's forty year reign was characterized by political stability, which enabled Ḥafiz al-Asad to turn Syrian into a strong regional actor. All this collapsed in a flash. Whatever the future may hold for Syria, whether the regime survives on the points of the army's bayonets or it falls and a new political order arises, it seems that the country is destined, not to advance, but rather to fall back into a situation like that of the past. One recalls the 1940s and 1950s when the governments in power were weak. They relied mainly on the urban Sunni population for support, and especially the traditional notable families and the bourgeoisie. Their control over the peripheral areas of the country was unsteady, as was their control over the locales inhabited by various ethnic communities, for example, the Alawites along the coastal strip, the Druze of Mt. Druze, and the Kurds in the Jazira region. Indeed, during those early years of Syria's independence the state's and the society's fundamental components were not yet consolidated. It was a time of ceaseless struggle: over the identity of the state, the path it should follow, and who should rule. It was a time when external powers blatantly intervened in Syria's affairs and turned the country into an arena of regional and international conflict.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Eyal Zisser, *The 'Struggle for Syria': Return to the Past?*, "Mediterranean Politics" 2012, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 105–110.