Assad Regime Resilience During the Syrian Civil War
An Historical Perspective

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The Arab Spring heralded a political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. According to James Barnes, “its most striking feature has been the fragility of authoritarianism itself”.\(^{(1)}\) While this may be true for the regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia or Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, it is not so in Syria. Here, the al-Assad regime has retained power throughout a six-year conflict that has claimed the lives of half a million Syrians, and continues to strengthen its position.\(^{(2)}\) In contemporary analysis, its resilience is often attributed to support from international allies Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, disunity and radicalisation amongst the opposition and its successful attempt to project itself as Syria’s only prospect for stable and secular government.

These factors, while crucial to understanding regime persistence, present a limited historical understanding of its resilience. Furthermore, there remains an assumption that the conflict is entirely sectarian in nature with a minority Alawite regime fighting the Sunni majority, both radical and moderate. It will be argued that a broader, historical view is needed to avoid sectarian reductionism and generalisations about the wars religious dimension. Historical approaches consider the ability of the regime to mobilise influential segments of the population which, regardless of sectarian affiliation, retain interests in regime survival. By examining how the regime has historically constructed networks within the business and clerical elites, this paper will propose alternative explanations for the regime’s resilience.

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Understanding the longevity of authoritarianism:

Scholars differ in their understandings of regime resilience. Augustus Norton suggests civil society remains an ineffective motivator of democratisation.\(^{(3)}\) With politically controlled labour unions and business organisations lacking autonomy, there is a paucity of societal space for developing a democratising force within society.\(^{(4)}\) Government control of civil society in Syria was crucial in maintaining resilience; NGOs were controlled by government officials while beyond this, civil society was limited to charitable and religious causes, or ‘moujtamma ahli.’\(^{(5)}\)

Secondly, the state remains the key institution in regional economies. Despite limited liberalisation, the public sector constitutes a disproportionate percentage of employment and gross national product.\(^{(6)}\) The ways in which the Syrian state adapted its systems of economic control will be examined in the first section of this paper. Less is understood about the ways in which the regime has adapted the economy during the conflict through continued economic co-optation.

The international politics of authoritarianism, as noted by May Darwich, can protect and embolden autocrats.\(^{(7)}\) Contemporary analysis of Syrian regime resilience focuses on international support, with the regime benefiting from Russian and Iranian military, economic and diplomatic support. However, this alone is insufficient for understanding why the regime

\(^{(3)}\) See A. R. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East vol 1 and 2*, E.J Brill, Leiden, 1996.


still maintains considerable support from the Syrian population. This paper will attempt to outline these domestic factors of resilience.

Eva Bellin argues that democratic transitions succeed only when the state’s coercive apparatus lacks the “will or capacity to crush it.” Authoritarianism has proven exceptionally robust because the coercive apparatus has been exceptionally willing to crush reform from below.\(^8\) In Bellin’s revisions in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2012, she ‘confirms that the comportment of the coercive apparatus is pivotal to determining the durability of authoritarian regime.’\(^9\) Steven Heydemann develops this argument, suggesting that alongside willingness to use force ‘embattled rulers resorted to ethno-sectarianism and exclusionary strategies of popular mobilisation in order to shore up support within divided societies.’\(^10\)

In Syria, a coercive response to the uprising has been crucial in maintaining regime power. However, the ways in which these coercive structures have been constructed through economic integration and pluralist recruitment and deployment policies are as important as the military campaign.

However insightful, these indicators are inadequate to understand how Bashar al-Assad has survived years of conflict. While literature discussing the construction of power in Syria are plentiful, few attempts have been made to link historical context to the Syrian regime’s wartime resilience. This paper will approach this shortcoming through analysing the ways in which the regime has effectively co-opted economic and religious elites.

Maria Josua defines co-option as ‘The capacity of the ruling elite to bind strategic actors to the regime,’\(^11\) and refers to the use of ‘informal (patrimonial rule) and formal (party rule)


https://ecpr.eu/filestore/paperproposal/9214dc5a-87f7-4466-ad42-3654f0d3f347.pdf.
mechanisms by which strategic actors are tied to the regime elite."(12) In clientelist regimes such as Syria, the regime seeks to provide a stable economic base to their rule.\(^{(13)}\) While Syria is not a conventional rentier state, the ways in which the regime co-opts the key economic sectors are of vital importance.\(^{(14)}\) This paper will examine the ways in which economic and religious co-option have underpinned regime power.

This paper also draws on the concept of authoritarian upgrading. Heydemann and Hinnebusch present a structural model of authoritarian resilience, suggesting that regimes construct resilience through recombinant adaptations: establishing state-led nongovernmental organisations as a veneer of civil society, co-opting selected civil society groups and religious organisations; and making use of a variety of coercive strategies.\(^{(15)}\) Therefore, to understand the nature of authoritarian rule, it is essential to examine institutions, elite alliances and configurations of power with autocratic systems.\(^{(16)}\) While this analysis is persuasive and highlights dynamics of regime resilience pre-war, little is understood about how the regime has utilised these religious and economic adaptions during the conflict.

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Ba’athists, Business and the Economic Underpinnings of Resilience:

Economic liberalisation and its resulting social tensions are often identified as a cause of the uprising.\(^{(17)}\) While economic reforms alienated large sections of Syrian society, the ties reform fostered between the regime and its business partners are crucial to understanding the longevity of the regime in the current conflict. Not only do they play a role in supporting the regime militarily, they finance the regime to sustain responsibilities of statehood across both regime and rebel controlled territory.

When Hafez al-Assad seized power, the Sunni majority viewed his Alawite sect as religiously backward, and the regimes Ba’athist ideology as incompatible with their worldviews, and a significant threat to their economic interests.\(^{(18)}\) Despite this scepticism, the regime developed support within communities it had politically side-lined, notably the wealthy Sunni merchant and business classes of Aleppo and Damascus, while enhancing Alawite and other minority interests.\(^{(19)}\) This solidified an influential base of businessmen with a vested stake in the longevity of the regime,\(^{(20)}\) achieved through agrarian reform and limited economic liberalisation through state-led economic growth.\(^{(21)}\)


Regime business relationships were entrenched after Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000. The regime, in conjunction with the economic elite, mitigated economic downturns by pursuing economic liberalisation, privatising financial interests of existing elites allowing them considerable control over public assets.\(^{(22)}\) Alongside a reduction in subsidies, private banks were permitted for the first time in forty years, and plans for a stock market were presented.\(^{(23)}\) The announcement in 2005 of a “social market economy” consolidated these reforms, combining state guidance and market economics.\(^{(24)}\) The plans failed to provide stable institutions or accountability, maligned small businesses interests and disenfranchised a large number of Syrian’s, mainly in ruralities due to subsidy cuts to fuel, fertiliser and other commodities. However, they achieved the regime’s political objective of cementing alliances with an elite spanning ethnic and religious divides, creating a backbone of urban and middle class elites that profited from close ties to regime power.

Economic reforms also created an increasingly powerful entrepreneurial class who profited from a newly-developed consumerist economy, and in ventures in partnership with many European companies including Carrefour, Adidas and Benneton.\(^{(25)}\) For the regime, economic liberalisation created new sources of revenue, permitting the regime to increase the scale of economic resources at the regime’s disposal. This allowed for the management of these new opportunities in ways that sustained the loyalty of those on whose support the regime depended, especially in the security forces, and buttressed regime resilience.\(^{(26)}\) The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2006 allowed for a range of opportunities for commercial development. Many Syrians gained access to communication technology previously unavailable to them, private universities were established across the country and


\(^{(23)}\) B. Haddad, *The Syrian Regime’s Business Backbone*.


western-style shopping malls began to proliferate. In this sense, daily life in Syria became more comfortable, and the regime received the credit from those who benefited. This capacity of the regime to economically adapt, create new sources of rent and co-opt networks of clientelism is, as Donati argues, ‘central to the resilience of the regime.’

These connections, developed through economic adaptation, have been consolidated through inter-confessional marriage. Members of the al-Assad family have married the daughters of Sunni businessman and military officers to broaden their patronage networks throughout the business, and security elites. Bashar al-Assad himself married Asma al-Akhas, the daughter of a prominent Sunni diplomat. This elite spans ethno-religious divides and is united in loyalty to the regime. Hanna Batatu suggests that the dominance of Alawites in the economic and security apparatus is the result of Hafaz al-Assads solidification of power around a close group of ultra-loyalists united by tribe and kinship rather than sectarian identity. At the outset of revolution in 2011, ‘the business community the Assad’s had created in their own image had transformed Syria from a semi-socialist state into a crony capitalist state par-excellence.’

Reform and the construction of a pan-ethnic elite resulted in the stratification of the business community. Samar Aboud suggests that by 2011, the business community consisted of three segments: the bulk of small and medium enterprises; the ‘integrated’

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(28) Heydemann and Leenders, *Middle East Authoritarianism*, p. 46.


(32) B. Haddad, “The Syrian Regime’s Business Backbone”.

business elite forming an organic part of the regime through family patronage; and the ‘dependent’ business elite who owe their wealth and power to their connections to the regime but are not connected through family or social linkages. There is also an influential ‘external’ business elite.\(^{(34)}\) The ways in which the elite have responded to the conflict, as well as the policies of authoritarian adaption remain crucial to understanding regime resilience.\(^{(35)}\)

**Co-optation and Conflict: Syria’s Economic Adaptation:**

With the eruption of conflict during 2011, the regime devised methods to continue to co-opt business backers. Sanctions imposed in 2011 played a significant role in determining the allegiance of the business community.\(^{(36)}\) Intended to pressure business leaders into abandoning the regime they have, through complicated structure and difficulty in circumventing, had the opposite impact.\(^{(37)}\) With no defections from the ranks of big business, the integrated elite, or dependent elites, sanctions have only served to entrench the interdependence between business elites and the regime itself.\(^{(38)}\) Sanctions allowed the co-optation of new elites who are ‘politically dependent on the regime and have an economic stake in the continuation of conflict as they have been enriched by it.’\(^{(39)}\)

Hopes that big business could shift support to opposition authorities, cripple the economy, and undermine the regime were largely misplaced. While there were attempts by marginalised businessmen Ali and Wasim Sanqar (car dealers in Damascus ‘burned’ by


\(^{(38)}\) B. Haddad, “The Syrian Regimes Business Backbone”.

preferential towards Bashar’s cousin Rami Makhluf), it was mainly expatriate businessmen who aligned themselves with opposition forces. As Bassam Haddad notes, it would have been difficult for the regime to hold out in Damascus and Aleppo had business interests sided with the opposition.

The integrated and dependent elites have been crucial in financing the regime’s rallies and its ability to continue financing its war effort. These elites funded propaganda campaigns and rallies, choosing to openly support the regime, expecting that the regime will protect their interests in any future peace deal. Moreover, as the crisis mutated into civil war, the regime cut military expenditure, relying on a core group of elites for the funding of militia ‘Shabiha’ battalions. Regime strongmen such as Rami Maklouf and Ayman Jaber, investors in Cham Capital, a product of economic liberalisation, have orchestrated the funding and foundation of militias that the regime has increasingly relied upon to sustain its military campaigns.

The regime has partly maintained business support through adaption into a war economy, sustaining both the state, integrated, and dependent elites who remain dependent on regime power. The regime, limited in its supply of food, oil and other vital commodities, allowed businessmen to make lucrative deals across battle lines. Government businessmen have been involved in deals involving Islamic State and other rebel groups in order to sustain its coffers. Furthermore, the privatisation of oil, especially after Iran extended $3.6 billion of

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(41) B. Haddad, “The Syrian Regimes Buisness Backbone”.


credit for its purchase, proved lucrative, providing important sources of revenue.\(^{(46)}\) Such illicit trade, alongside financial support from Iran and Russia, has been crucial in sustaining support from business and wider Syrian society.

Since 2015, the regime has also courted the business elite through what Jihad Yazigi has called a ‘frenzy of new laws to attract investment’\(^{(47)}\). These include forgiving companies’ tax arrears, establishing small and medium business enterprises, promoting local production, legislating private business initiatives to offer businessmen dividends in government projects, and creating an ‘iron and steel council’ in anticipation of post war construction booms.\(^{(48)}\) This adaptation further bound the interests of these loyalist business elites with the fate of the regime, maintaining the regime’s hold over the socio-economic dynamics of the country.\(^{(49)}\)

An underestimated factor behind the regime’s survival has been its ability to claim that the regime remains an irreplaceable provider of essential public services and economic security, even for Syrians living in areas under opposition control.\(^{(50)}\) Regime institutions underpin much of Syrian public life, remaining the only structures that can issue travel documentation, property rights, pensions, and register new-borns.\(^{(51)}\) Furthermore, state-owned schools, universities and hospitals provide irreplaceable welfare, with universities enrolling 650,000 students nationwide.\(^{(52)}\) The regime remains the principle employer, with 1.4 million public


\(^{(49)}\) Y. Sayigh, “Clausewitz in Syria”.


\(^{(51)}\) K. Khaddour, “The Assad Regime’s Hold on the Syrian State”, p.6

\(^{(52)}\) T. al-Barazi, “Interview from “From the End” program on State TV”, January 18th, 2015, accessed on 19/5/17, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJn5MZN0XEk&feature=em=uploademail](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJn5MZN0XEk&feature=em=uploademail).
officials in 2011-2012.\(^{(53)}\) Regime control over the distribution of humanitarian aid, food, water and electricity has also enabled the regime to portray itself as a ‘safe-haven’ from the suffering experienced in rebel held areas.\(^{(54)}\) This has encouraged displaced civilians to move to these areas, reinforcing the regime’s narrative that it is the only institution capable of providing safety.\(^{(55)}\)

In order for the regime to deliver vital services, the once widespread state apparatus has been consolidated into defendable urban areas under the umbrella defence of loyalist forces, mainly raised and paid for by business elites. Aside from these state militias, the regime has armed civilians and organised them into local committees (lijan Shabiya), and while these groups are perhaps motivated by a desire to protect their neighbourhoods and families rather than any political affiliation with the regime, they inevitably contribute to regime resilience.\(^{(56)}\)

It is through the historical co-optation of a narrow business elite that the regime has been able to retain its resilience throughout the economic devastation that war has brought to Syria.


Regime and Religion in Syria: Sectarianism or Pluralism?

Syria’s ethno-religious composition is a recurring theme in contemporary analyses. As Joshua Lindis notes, the ‘Ba’athist regime and its deeply-entrenched structures of control are frequently defined through binary minoritarian and majoritarian power dynamics.\(^{(57)}\) The prevailing description of the regime as “an Alawite regime, ascribing it with an outwardly Alawite identity and agenda”, encapsulates this perception.\(^{(58)}\) However, “this portrayal misrepresents the complexity of Syria’s brand of authoritarianism.”\(^{(59)}\) It simplifies mechanisms of power, centres of authority and sources of regime support. While there is no doubt that Alawites dominate Syrian military and political institutions, it is important that we consider broader sources of support if we are to understand the conflict and formulate methods for its cessation.

The ways in which the regime has developed a ‘robust strategy to shape and co-opt the different religious establishments, especially Syria’s Sunni Ulama [Clergy]’ is of crucial importance in understanding its longevity.\(^{(60)}\) Lacking the political means to institute a Ba’athist Sunni clergy, the regime retained existing clerical authorities, but restricted subversive elements.\(^{(61)}\) However, after the Hama Uprising in 1982, the regime chose not to rely on traditional clerical bodies, but on institutions and individuals selected for their loyalty. Prominent amongst these was Islamic scholar Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti who, after the al-Assads, ‘became the most recognised face on Syrian television.’\(^{(62)}\) This policy of selective clerical


cultivation has maintained state-Ulama relations, allowing the regime to present itself as the protector of Syria’s moderate religious community.

More recently, the various state-supported elements of Syria’s clergy have been instrumentalised by the state’s business and political networks, who finance the country’s religious institutions in order to secure Sunni support for the regime. This has changed not only the economy of religion in Syria, but also the position of the Sunni clergy within Syria’s political structure.\(^{(63)}\) The Sunni population thus had less incentive to abandon the regime, especially after economic liberalisation. For them, the opening up of the country’s economy, especially the establishment of Islamic banks and insurance companies has been especially valuable as it allowed for the recruitment of Muslim scholars into the Sharia boards of these new institutions.\(^{(64)}\) A pamphlet released in 2007 by Sunni cleric Yasir al-‘Ayti highlights these close connections.

_The sheik thinks that by allying with the state official, he protects his jama’a, and that by joining with the merchant he protects his financial resources. The state official thinks that through his alliance with the sheik, he keeps the situation under control and that through his alliance with the merchant he takes a cut of the profits. The merchant believes his alliance with the state official ensures the support for his violations of the law, and that through his alliance with the sheik, he assures himself a place in the afterlife._ \(^{(65)}\)

This pamphlet highlights the ways in which these relationships ensure the survival of the regime’s religious, political and business elites. According to Thomas Pierret, this is ‘key to the amazing resilience of the regime.’\(^{(66)}\)

Bashar al-Assad adapted to the growth of Islamic groups, adapting his father’s policy of co-option. Bashar sought to reinforce regime legitimacy with the Sunnis following the Damascus Spring in 2004 which witnessed the emergence of secular opposition groups which had been suppressed by his father. To do this, he courted the favour and support of Sunni religious majority who, fearful of secularism, responded to renewed support for moderate Islamic

\(^{(63)}\) T. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, p. 130.
\(^{(64)}\) T. Pierret, “Religion and State in Syria”, p. 159-160.
A backbone of moderate Sunni support for the regime was created, enabling Bashar al-Assad to position himself as the only alternative to extremism.

This was in part a rhetorical exercise. Instead of the hard-line secularism of Ba’athist ideology, he promoted ideas of ‘Takrees al-akhlaq wa nashr thaaqafat al-tasamuh, wa isal al-risala al-haqiqiya lil islam’ [propagating morality, spreading tolerance, and communicating the true message of Islam]. The aim was to create national unity, promoting religious moderation to counter rising Islamic radicalism.

The project was also supported by policies designed to placate the Sunni population. Firstly the ban of headscarves in schools was repealed. Although in reality the law had not been enforced since 1982, its repeal was deeply symbolic. Further, the regime sanctioned the release and return from exile of 800 members of Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, namely senior leader Abu Fateh al-Bayanuni. The regime also appointed independent and widely respected clerics to positions of power. In 2006, Aleppo cleric Ibrahim al-Salqini was appointed Mufti and allowed public celebrations of religious festivals alongside displays of religious iconography in the streets. Through these symbolic measures, the regime won over former enemies of the regime such as the leadership of Jama’at al Zayd, one of the educational movements involved in the Hama uprisings. These policies proved effective at

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(68) L. Khatib, R. Lefevre and J. Quareshi, State and Islam, p. 34.
a time when democratic forces were becoming increasingly vocal. Many Muslim scholars supported the regime; the priority was the fight against external enemies, a rhetorical device deployed continuously during the current conflict.\(^{74}\)

The regime also began to integrate religion into its institutions. In February 2004, the government inaugurated the first religious conference and invited clerics to lecture cadets in its military academies, institutions famous for their secular ideology. This symbolised the regime’s growing embrace of openly religious discourse and marked a distinct break from the doctrine of Hafez al-Assad.\(^{75}\) In addition, Pierret and Selvik note an increased number of prominent Sunni figures standing for election in parliament. In 2007’s legislative elections, Mohammed Hamshu and Abd al-Salam Rajih, both Sunni’s with close political and clan ties to the regime, gained over 80,000 votes.\(^{76}\) The state’s tolerance of the Sunni leadership thus resulted in wider support for the regime.

However, this is not to say that the religious elite became politicised. There was a realisation that the continuation of their Islamic project would be conditioned by their “overt and fundamental disengagement from the world of politics”, thus stifling religiously based moderate opposition while maintaining Sunni support for the regime.\(^{77}\) However, 2007 to 2011 saw the secularisation of the state. The regime implemented policies of standardisation in sharia institutions, banned certain religious festivals and imprisoned conservative religious figures after a large bomb attack in 2008.\(^{78}\) However, this was framed with a contradictory conservative rhetoric. The minister of religious endowments relied heavily on Sa’id Ramadann al-Buti, whose conservative agenda mitigated his unpopular policies amongst the clergy, maintaining his legitimacy and that of the regime, amongst Sunni society.\(^{79}\)


\(^{75}\) L. Khatib, R. Lefevre and J. Quareshu, *State and Islam*, p. 40.


\(^{77}\) L. Khatib, R. Lefevre, J. Quareshu, *State and Islam*, p. 41.


The regime’s response to the 2003 Iraq invasion did much to solidify relations with the Sunni majority. “Bashar’s behaviour during the war gained him immediate political rewards in Syria” ensuring his regime sustained nationalist credibility. (80) Firstly, Bashar al-Assad positioned himself at the head of Arab opposition to the war belligerently criticising American action. Furthermore, the regime allowed the smuggling of arms and facilitated the flow of Jihadi volunteers. (81) The call for Jihad was openly encouraged by the Syrian government; the Grand Mufti of Syria, a figure courted by the regime, issued a fatwa legitimising suicide bombings against American forces in the country. (82) These steps shored up domestic support by appropriating and exploiting Islamist trends that had begun to emerge within Syrian society, and increasing state support for religious affairs leading Bashar to reach out to clerical groups marginalised by his father. (83) This took the form of strengthening support within charitable Islamic societies, adopting a more permissible attitude towards Islamists in the public sphere and aligning itself with moderate Islamist groups. (84) These policies of adaption showed Bashar al-Assad as ‘being close to the heart of the Arab man-on-the-street and willing to do his bidding,’ (85) maintaining ‘the unity of the ruling coalition and to ensure the regimes survival well before the region began its decent into sectarian conflict.’ (86)

Through a selective co-optation of selected religious elites in Syria, as well as foreign policy adaption in support of domestic popular opinion, the regime maintained a considerable element of support amongst Syria’s Sunnis. As a result, the Sunni populations in Syria did not react to the 2011 revolution as a unified movement. (87) The quietism that the Syrian ulama

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(82) G. Abdul-Ahmed, The Road From Syria.
(83) T. Pierret, Religion and State in Syria, p. 87.
(84) S. Heydemann and R. Leenders (eds), Middle East Authoritarianisms, p. 19.
(85) E. Zisser, Syria and the War in Iraq, p. 47.
(86) L. Khatib, R. Lefevre, J. Quaresha, State and Islam, p.36.
have displayed since the outbreak of the revolution, ‘demonstrates the success of the regimes co-optation measures.’(88)

**Syria’s Sunnis: the Extent of Wartime Support**

While much has been written on the largely Sunni opposition, less however, is understood about those Sunni’s that have stayed loyal to the regime. As is so often the case when analysing support within authoritarian states, it is difficult to assess Sunni support for the Assad regime. Data is scant and what is available is often highly politicised. However, some evidence is available with which we can assess the religious pluralism evident in the make-up of the Syrian Arab Army. While Bellin and Joshua suggest that embattled regimes resort to ethnosectarian coercive measures, the case of Syria is perhaps more complex. This section examines the extent to which the sectarian narrative of the conflict is misunderstood.

Faced with revolt, Assad reversed his policies of re-secularisation; veiled teachers were returned to posts, government Islamists were reinstated and outward signs of popular secularism were reversed such as the casino recently opened in Damascus.(89) The regime also set up new religious institutions such as the Islamic TV channel “Nur al-Sham” and religious university institutions. The regime allowed these schools to issue recognised certificates, satisfying a long held demand from more conservative Sunni clerics.(90) By addressing concerns of Syria’s clerical elite, the regime managed to ensure the loyalty of its traditional religious allies and popular Sunni figures such as al-Buti, who has vehemently criticised the revolt as a foreign inspired conspiracy against the country. This also allowed the regime to crack down on more rebellious religious figures, in a move that prompted little reaction from the middle and upper class Sunni population. This passivity had ‘less to do with religion, than

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the fact that many well off Syrians from urban areas were not entirely enthusiastic about a predominantly peasant and working class, and increasingly radical, uprising.”

Despite regime assaults on largely by Sunni areas, a large proportion of Sunni’s and others who harbour genuine concerns about the regime feel threatened by the rise of extremist elements of the armed opposition. These concerns are most apparently among middle and upper class urban Sunnis, and in particular the business and merchant interests cultivated by the regime over many years. The perception that the opposition is largely rurally based, led by religiously conservative and unsophisticated villagers has alienated urban Sunnis who hold little sympathy for the grievances of the rural poor and have little in common socially with their rural co-confessionists. The regime’s ability to continue its rhetoric of moderation and religious pluralism have been vital in sustaining Sunni support, despite the apparent sectarian fractures the conflict has forged. With the emergence of extremist groups such as Islamic State, the regime has positioned itself as ‘the lesser of two evils’, protecting Syria’s Arab state, minorities, and moderate Sunni populations. This has not only protected the regime from minority and urban Sunni uprisings, but has complicated arguments supporting intervention into the conflict.

The opposition itself has brought to attention the role of power Sunni businessmen and their roles in supporting the Ba’athist forces, including the organisation, financing and arming of irregular militias. Mohammed Jabar, a prominent Sunni businessman and former Syrian Army General, formed one of the regime’s most effective units, the “Syrian Desert Hawks”,

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albeit one that owes no allegiance to army command structure and was formed in order to protect its patrons significant interests in Syria’s Al Sha’ar Gas Fields.\(^{(95)}\)

In addition to irregular forces, Sunni’s in the Syrian Army and security apparatus are oft overlooked by commentators. While many of the upper echelons, positions of command and elite formations are dominated by Alawites with close ties to the regime as conceptualised by Bellin, Sunnis constitute the majority of the army’s middling and lower ranks and some influential positions. The current Minister of Defence Fahd al-Freij, is a prominent Sunni from Hama. Further, two powerful intelligence officers, Ali Mamlouk and Mohammad Dib Zaitoun, hail from powerful Sunni families. Even the commander of the Sixty Fifth Brigade that protects Latakia, the Assad’s home region, is Brigadier General Jihad Mohamed Sultan, a high ranking Sunni general.\(^{(96)}\) In terms of the rank and file, estimates suggest that Sunnis constitute around 60% to 65% of the Syrian Arab Army and despite mass defections of conscripted youth, high levels of attrition and recruiting problems, Sunnis continue to play key roles in the military campaign at the highest levels of the battle order.\(^{(97)}\) This suggests that sectarian narratives underestimates the complexity of the conflict and the strength of co-optative networks within regime support.


**Conclusion:**

Therefore, while contemporary analysis and scholarly study is in part correct in suggesting that the regime in Syria has maintained its legitimacy through international support, military power and coercion, and a divided and increasingly radical opposition, the Syrian regime tests all our frameworks for understanding resilience. The ways in which the regime co-opted economic and religious elites while adapting to changes in domestic and international affairs have been crucial in its continuing resilience during Syria’s war. Through building networks of patronage within Syria’s business elite, the regime ensured that it maintained the economic resources needed to sustain ferocious military campaigns, protect areas under its control, and continue to provide functions of statehood vital in maintaining its position with those Syrians under his control. Economic adaptations through a war economy allow the regime to retain access to resources such as oil and other resources under opposition control or international sanctions. These functions of statehood have been crucial to the regime maintaining a façade of legitimacy, presenting itself as the only actor in Syria capable of providing every day essentials, protection and stability to the Syrian people. As noted by Kheder Khaddour, “Assad’s control of Syria’s public institutions, and the provision of basic services will need to be broken in order to solve the Syrian crisis.”

Moreover, the sectarian narratives often presented in scholarly and policy analysis as a driving feature of the Syrian conflict blur an important element of resilience. The ways in which the regime co-opted religious authorities and adapted their policies towards religion remain crucial to understanding regime resilience. Through a careful co-optation of a loyal religious elite who accepted political quietism for limited reforms to public religious policy, the regime has built a strong base of Sunni and minority support both in the army and in public institutions. Policies of religious co-optation and policy adaption, especially in response to the Iraq invasion and rising extremist violence in the region allowed the regime to maintain support of the Sunni population, while mitigating the impacts of rising calls for democratisation in the years in the lead up to conflict. This co-optation has allowed the regime

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to position itself as religiously pluralistic and a bastion of secularism in the face of radical Sunni opposition, an opposition that the regime portrays as threatening Syria’s moderate religious climate and numerous minority groups. Resilience therefore, rather than coming from the ethno-sectarian coercive mobilisation suggested by Bellin, stems from attempts at a pluralist, nationalist worldview that recruits forces from across Syria’s sectarian divides.

This analysis suggests contemporary frameworks are inadequate to understand Syrian regime resistance during the civil war. The ways in which the Syrian regime has built longstanding networks of co-optation, and adapted its policies to suit its environment have effectively allowed the regime to weather the waves of conflict that have devastated the country. If policy makers are to effectively formulate policies for the caseation of hostilities in Syria, these elements warrant greater scholarly and policy attention.
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