

Reconceptualizing Rebel Governing Authority

The institutions that constitute a rebel government have long been understood and evaluated in comparable terms to those of a state government, the only difference being orientation (i.e. against versus on behalf of the state). Similarly, the doctrine underpinning modern state-building and counterinsurgency campaigns, repurposed in Syria in the service of a “good” rebellion, has emphasized the import of rationalized governance in winning the population’s support, its “hearts and minds.” In this chapter, we consider the limits of employing rational legitimacy as a conceptual outcome and offer our own – institutional closeness – as a theoretical alternative with distinct analytical possibilities for the study of insurgent rule.

INSTITUTIONAL RATIONALITY AND REBEL RULE

Scholars of rebel politics have long conceived of governing authority in institutional, bureaucratic terms, anchoring their conceptions of legitimate rule to the notion of a rationalized social contract between ruler and citizenry. This approach has emphasized the import of rebel institution-building in terms that reflect an administrative conception of statehood, one where material concerns are of particular, if not exclusive, import.

Rebel Rule as Social Contract

In his landmark piece on guerrilla government in Latin America, Thomas Wickham-Crowley characterized the establishment of credible rebel authority as contingent on the provision of defense against foreign

threats, internal security, and “contributions to the material security of the populace, the last by increasing peasant incomes and by providing health services, literacy training and sometimes land to rural cultivators.” This constituted, in his words, “an implicit social contract.”¹ In a later essay, Wickham-Crowley invoked Max Weber in his articulation of insurgent governing authority as “typically legitimated via a process of macrosocial exchange that takes place between the (incipient) rulers and those whom they seek to rule.”² Nelson Kasfir put forward his general articulation of rebel governance as including “encouragement of civilian participation, formation of civilian administration, and regulation or taxation of commercial production of high-value goods or services.”³

In her survey of wartime governance in Colombia, Ana Arjona conceived of “rebelocracy” as a set of guerrilla institutions whose functions – preservation of public order, conflict resolution, taxation, economic and social regulation – aligned closely with those one would expect of a capable state administration.⁴ Jeremy Weinstein characterized rebel government as “a series of institutions established by an insurgent organization to manage relations with civilians living in the territory under its control that set in place a system of taxation and a series of rules (formal/informal) for governing civilian life.”⁵ In a push to bring the state-building and rebel governance literatures into conversation, Sukanya Podder urged scholars to employ the concept of legitimacy as the bridge,⁶ while Reyko Huang denoted armed groups that governed as greater or lesser state-builders according to how many institutions they established.⁷ And Megan Stewart argued that secessionist groups are incentivized to serve their communities, demonstrating their capacity to rule on those terms once independent.⁸

In many ways, the transposition of a state-based conception of rational legitimacy as governing authority into the realm of rebel politics makes good sense. Insurgents are, after all, engaged in what Stathis Kalyvas called “competitive state building”; their performance as “counter-states” can thus be understood as an effort to out-do the state in order to win the population over to their side.⁹ The import of both coercion and capital in that effort is paramount, given the requirements to establish institutionalized control over the use of force and the capacity to deliver public goods and services.

And yet there is a conceptual and empirical mismatch between the rational Weberian ideal type and the politics that unfold within so-called fragile or failing states. As Joel Migdal wrote of weak states, “we cannot simply assume that as a whole [the state] acts in a rational and coherent

fashion, or strategically follows a defined set of interests.”¹⁰ Why would aspiring counter-states be expected to do any better?

Furthermore, a rational Weberian perspective – and a corresponding focus on material capabilities – risks obscuring particular features of rebel governance that distinguish its work from that of the peacetime administrative state. The nonmaterial ties that bind people to one another and to those who rule them play a defining rule in the production of governing authority during war. They mediate the management of coercion and capital, shaping the way violence and resources are mobilized by those who control them, and they can sometimes compensate for material deficits. When rebel governors inhabit and exemplify these solidarities, they earn the trust and respect of their constituents.

War-Torn Life as “Life in the Open Desert”

In his fourteenth-century theory of dynastic rule, Ibn Khaldun exalted the lived experiences of those tribal peoples who roamed the deserts and had little choice but to make do under profoundly difficult circumstances. They exploited their vigilance, bravery and, ultimately, their willingness to rely on one another. We propose that life in the midst of war represents a modern analog to “life in the open desert.” In other words, the rougher stuff of politics, perhaps obsolete in times of peace, proves central to credible rebel rule. For Ibn Khaldun, as Robert Irwin explained, nomadic tribal (Bedouin or *badawa*, meaning “desert life”) politics captured the intellectual imagination because it was organized around and driven by a sense of collective solidarity, *asabiyya*: “So it was that the wild and sometimes fanatically religious tribesmen were able to defeat and conquer empires and cities and go on to create new regimes.”¹¹

A concept with a variety of definitions, we employ and adapt the ubiquitous and broad notion of *asabiyya* as solidarity. In particular, to borrow from Heena Qadir and Fida Mohammad, we understand this solidarity as “the state of mind that makes individuals identify with a group,” “a ‘we feeling’ among people . . . a mutual understanding that holds people together.”¹² Syed Farid Alatas described it as “a sense of common cause and destiny, and the binding ties of loyalty that are founded to a great extent but not exclusively on blood ties.”¹³ The concept of *asabiyya* and the means by which it made itself manifest among the desert nomads proved central to the medieval scholar’s larger understanding of power, political authority, and the cyclical nature of rule. In particular, Ibn Khaldun contrasted the pluck and fortitude of

these itinerant communities to those who lived more settled lives and could avail themselves of the security, comfort, and complacency a sedentary existence afforded.¹⁴

Asabiyya cannot be conceived in terms divorced from considerations of power and the seeking of power,¹⁵ which means it resides at the heart of explanations about the emergence of new, aspiring forms of order and rule. After all, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqadimmah*, is, as Alatas explained, largely "devoted to elaborating a theory of state formation and decline."¹⁶ These solidarities are especially salient for rebel governance, because they offer a collective means of managing the oft-anarchic conditions that characterize war. In Thomas J. Barfield's telling, Ibn Khaldun's characterization of tribal-state relations rests on the logic that "in times of warfare such bonds better ensured mutual aid and cooperation than did the weaker political or economic interests motivating the mercenary armies employed by states."¹⁷ Those who found themselves attached to one another in meaningful terms learned that this bond, this "spontaneous upsurge of emotional oneness," yielded "the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself and to press one's claims."¹⁸

"Elementary Units of Political Order"

In drawing on Ibn Khaldun's model of nomadic (versus sedentary) governance, we follow in the footsteps of other social scientists who have sought to tease out the different concerns and requirements that arise in counter-state politics. In his writings on people who fled the tightening grip of the state, James C. Scott also referenced Ibn Khaldun's model, while offering a different schema, contrasting the existence of those settled in the lowlands from those who stayed in the hills. The latter, like their Bedouin brethren, lived at a remove from the cosmopolitan center, erecting alternate forms of governance that organized social, political, and economic life in very different terms from those of the consolidating state. These governing modalities, which Scott termed "elementary units of political order," tended to be limited in their geographic reach, dynamic in their composition, and "in almost constant motion: dissolving, splitting, relocating, merging, and reconstituting."¹⁹

The nomadic tribe, like the upland enclave, was "parochial in its interest"; as Barfield explained, "the strength of tribal *asabiyya* fell off rapidly as it grew beyond the local lineage." This parochialism

represented “a liability in terms of expansion but a strength in resisting outsiders.”²⁰ Noting that these frontier collectives often escape the scholarly gaze, Scott insisted that they can and must be understood on their own terms.²¹ We now take up the challenge in our own attempt to make sense of those “elementary units of political order” that arose across the Syrian rebelscape. Their constitution, evolution, and decay reflect the capricious nature of civil war, especially when it becomes internationalized. Nonetheless, the emergence of authoritative rule in the midst of these otherwise disordered conditions can and must be recognized as distinct in process from peacetime legitimacy. Those who build it seek to undo and reinvent the organization of politics, while balancing a set of needs and struggles distinct from their peacetime counterparts.

THE RIGHT TO RULE AS KHALDUNIAN CLOSENESS

Ibn Khaldun’s treatise explained how regimes earned and lost authority as a function of their ability to capture surrounding solidarities. For him, ruling respect was won through struggle, only to decay over time as those who inherited legacies of rule squandered their forefathers’ hard-earned authority. Rulers closest, in time and space, to the struggles that defined their communities were most beloved.²² There was, for him, a diminution in the political potency of a society as its elites grew comfortable in a more stable life.

If one accepts that life during war resembles Ibn Khaldun’s life in the desert, while life during peacetime resembles his city life, then one appreciates the limits of a Weberian emphasis on rationalized public goods provision (analogous to sedentarized rule). Governors able to stay close to the people they rule during war offer a distinct proposition. The adjective “close” has three different meanings, all of which are relevant to this brand of authority: “on very affectionate or intimate terms,” “very near to being something,” and “a short distance away or apart in space or time.” For a rebel institution to be close, then, it must be – both literally and metaphorically – on familiar terms with the political space over which it lays claim. Close rebel governors are those who reside and evolve within the delimited demography of their communities. They approximate, if not fulfill, the political aspirations of their constituents. And they share with those they govern the particular and intimate joys, sorrows, ups, and downs that mark life during war. They embed themselves, in other words, in the kinship, aspirational, and experiential solidarities (or *asabiyya*) that define their communities.

The Perils of Civilized Political Life

In Ibn Khaldun's world, with each passing generation, political life became increasingly civilized. Civilized political life was marked by a more genteel brand of *asabiyya*. Evolved solidarities manifested as refined associations that we can map quite neatly onto the Weberian paradigm of rational legitimacy. At this late stage, in Lenn Evan Goodman's telling, the state – “where institutions are impersonal, office-holders are interchangeable, laws are immutable” – has bloomed, capturing and repurposing these associations to its own ends: “[Men] no longer identify directly with the other members of their group, rather they tender such sacrifices as they make in the name of some principle or ideal, the group itself as an abstract, corporate entity, some institution or individual or even symbol representative of the group.”²³

Cosmopolitan life offers much in the way of security and predictability, both to be guarded through “laws, institutions, sedentary life and the division of labor.”²⁴ For a Weberian rationalist, the story ends here: arrival at rational, law-based bureaucratic good governance where “*asabiyya* has been sublimated.”²⁵ But Ibn Khaldun's narrative does not rest here; instead, it problematizes the very stasis to which advocates of good governance have since aspired, cautioning: “The reliance of sedentary people upon laws destroys their courage and power to resist.”²⁶ For Ibn Khaldun, so-called civilized political life could, in fact, be the beginning of decay if leaders grew estranged from the very struggles that first gave their regime credence: “The old savagery is transformed . . . Gradually their prowess is lost, their vigor is eroded, their power undermined.”²⁷

Sedentarization enabled corrosive temptations and forms of self-aggrandizement that, in turn, opened the door to “injustice, double dealing and hypocrisy.”²⁸ The indulgences of the proverbial good life brought with them the risk that those at ease with their power lapsed into complacency, losing “the quality of bravery that was their protection and defence.”²⁹ In their apathy, they also lost control over the hard-won respect of those they governed, “shatter[ing] the bridges of trust between the rulers and the ruled.”³⁰ To quote Goodman, “for civilized institutions *by their very nature* . . . lack that savagery which made possible life in the open desert.”³¹ Ernest Gellner echoed this point, explaining that, for Ibn Khaldun, the invocation of “lineages and groups” by settled folk amounted to “a kind of sociological fraud.”³² City life atomized and distanced people from one another, as their cooperative requirements ceased to be existential, a fact their politics came to represent.³³

“The Ties of Closeness”

To return analogically to the Khaldunian divide between desert and urban sensibilities, then, today’s civilians facing military siege or steady aerial bombardment live with deprivation and the looming threat of death that mirror the harsh realities of their desert-based predecessors. Like their ancient counterparts, their “main concern remains survival” and their “social, legal and even familial status remain intertwined with one another” through a set of solidarities that are “still direct, personal, unquestionable, still a matter of life and death.”³⁴ Civilians living in conflict, like people of the desert, reside in a distinct political space from their more secure, settled counterparts, who have “lost what the desperate man and the most dangerous members of a primitive society have in common, willingness, if necessary, to die.”³⁵ As Barfield put it, “*fitna* [chaos] forces urban people back into the *asabiyya* model. Suffering becomes the forge . . . the crucible” within which they bond to one another.³⁶ It is precisely this readiness to stay close, in every sense, to hardship – this instinct to sacrifice for one’s own – that makes the valiant governor, and not the insipid one, a trusted wartime authority.³⁷

A number of contemporary scholars have drawn attention to the means by which settings marked by tumult and uncertainty offer fertile ground for the activation of solidarities. In his ethnography of Accra’s slums, Keith Hart exposed an ecosystem whose inhabitants, dislocated from rural homes and transplanted into the mayhem of slum life, sought “a stable core in the chaos of every day life.”³⁸ Hart argued that it was trust – “like a tree, firm, steadfast, and loyal; not impervious to the evidence of the senses, but founded on a willingness to endure risk and uncertainty” – that delivered a kind of equilibrium amid the turbulence.³⁹ Trust, for Ernest Gellner, is a dividend only fully realized in the face of anarchy and the associations it requires. Anarchy, far from the villain, actually generates social spaces in which solidarities arise that not only make life livable but have value in their own right.⁴⁰ And, while Gellner made clear that there are a number of incompatibilities between modern life and the social worlds of several centuries ago, in his characterization of those differences, he revealed the utility of comparing nomadic, tribal life with life during war:

The type of cohesion which [Ibn Khaldun] considered paradigmatic – the cohesion of a tribal unit, forged by shared hardship in desert or mountain, reinforced by the ever-present threat of tribal enemies, and symbolized by the idiom of kinship – is

neither necessary nor even tolerable for a modern society. Such a society will not allow peacekeeping by feud, by private local wars, and its armoury enables it to impose its will fairly easily on any surviving tribes.⁴¹

Gellner's description of days gone by evokes precisely the kind of dangerous and unpredictable circumstance in which contemporary peoples find themselves when their countries erupt in violent conflict. Those living in such trying conditions demand a different kind of leadership than is lauded in peacetime. When their rulers stay close to the ravaged communities they govern – and the solidarities therein – these rebel governors become credible, trusted rulers. Here again, we are inspired by the work of other scholars of contentious politics, political violence, and state formation, who point to the value of a ruling authority's closeness to its constituents in times of unrest. Jonathan Obert's notion of "representative authority," which he employed to characterize the import of militias in the Reconstruction era of southern American political life, serves as another useful analog. Under these unsettled conditions, "the link between the private efforts of these citizens and the general public welfare *actually* depended on a subset of individuals capable of claiming they could adequately represent the public good."⁴²

In her work on Maoist guerrillas in India, Alpa Shah directed our attention to the reasons why people join and then stay in the fight. Moving beyond the common focus on grievance, she centered "the development of relations of intimacy between the mobilizing forces and the people in its area of expansion."⁴³ Referencing Christina Turner's work on "the ties of closeness" that arose in Japanese labor protests, Shah characterized the Maoists as "part of an extended family."⁴⁴ Belinda Robnett described the pivotal role a set of African-American women activists played in expanding the civil rights movement's base of support through their work as "bridge leaders." Their positionalities – "in touch with the desires of the community" – served as "the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations."⁴⁵

Each of these scholars drew our focus to the distinct possibilities that accrue to leaders who generate and embody a kind of political familiarity: they stay close to those they lead in the hard times. Leadership, in this case, does not derive from compelling charisma or an impressive war chest; it is the work of convincing ordinary, often reluctant, citizens to put *and keep* themselves in grave danger in the service of a larger cause.⁴⁶

ASABIYYA AS TILLIAN CONNECTION

In the context of rebellion, we will argue that three forms of solidarity – kinship, aspirational, and experiential – are of particular concern and that an articulation of solidarity inspired by Ibn Khaldun’s *asabiyya* enables us to understand their origin, expression, and evolution. These solidarities are types of Tillian connection that illuminate the particularities of insurgent politics and the unique governing authority that can emerge during war. Rebel governors capable of capturing these interwoven connectivities in their ruling institutions achieve the authoritative closeness to their constituents we have described.

Kinship Solidarity

We begin with the most basic form of solidarity, the kinship ties that bind people to one another and predate the rebellion. These may be familial but, in the context of local politics, we understand them more broadly as communal relationships that mark daily life over time.⁴⁷ A number of scholars have attended to the import of this brand of connection in rebellion. In his seminal work on the 1871 Paris Commune, Roger V. Gould described the salience of “pre-existing social networks,” pointing to the particular forms of trust, loyalty, and commitment that came from neighbors protecting neighbors.⁴⁸ Paul Staniland went on to argue, employing a number of South Asian cases, that insurgent groups “forged through overlapping social bases that pull together both leaders and local communities” found themselves in a better position than their counterparts to absorb and invest resources as they fought. As he put it, “militants go to war with the networks they have.”⁴⁹

Sarah Parkinson looked beyond the immediate architecture of militant organizations, asserting that comparable networks existed among civilians and played important roles in insurgency. Focused on those relationships that bound women to one another and to male fighters, she argued that “quotidian social networks” worked as “informal bridges” within Palestinian insurgent movements in Lebanon.⁵⁰ Sarah Zukerman Daly argued, in the context of the Colombian civil war, that these pre-conflict bonds enabled the otherwise thorny processes of post-conflict reintegration.⁵¹ We pick up these lines of argument to explore how familiarity advantages leaders and their organizations when they strive to command authority as wartime governors.

Aspirational Solidarity

Kinship ties, undoubtedly of import in the constitution of authoritative rebel governance, are distinct from a second kind of connection that we describe as aspirational solidarity.⁵² While many associate Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya* with the kinship ties of clan and tribe, he recognized the limits of those affiliations and drew attention to a distinct, wider bond that could transcend those ties. As Barfield explained, "like the inverse square rule for diffusion of light, the strength of tribal '*asabiyya* fell off rapidly as it grew beyond the local lineage ... One way out of this dilemma was to organize tribes around a common nontribal principle."⁵³ For Ibn Khaldun, this principle was religion, and we will engage with the binding role of Islam in Syrian rebel politics.⁵⁴

Decades ago, scholars of social movements directed attention to how organizations conjured collectivity by enabling people to imagine new orders.⁵⁵ David A. Snow and his collaborators drew on Erving Goffman's notion of framing to elaborate the interpretive devices necessary to mobilize; they stressed, in particular, the import of "frame alignment" in movement success.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, William H. Sewell Jr. criticized explanations of contentious politics that failed to reflect on "the cultural or ideational life" of those who rise up against the status quo. Sewell urged students of the French Revolution to pay attention to the means by which "ordinary French men and women" came to reconceive of social, political, and economic associations and the loyalties therein. This reimagining served as the basis for a novel set of ambitions for citizenship, the public-private divide, state-society relations, and the means by which violent insurrection could be employed on behalf of the people.⁵⁷

In his writing on the symbolic politics of insurgent rule, Zachariah Mampilly echoed this corrective, reminding readers that, in addition to aspiring for control and capacity on the ground, rebel leaders "seek to define a new collectivity as the basis for insurgent action, fostering greater individual identification with and attachment to the insurgent cause among the core constituency."⁵⁸ It is this "identification with and attachment to the cause" that constitutes a common aspiration among citizens and, under some circumstances, between citizens and their governors. In her ethnography of "the guerrilla zones of Jharkand" in India, Shah similarly described a "general moral solidarity" anchored to the sentiment that "'after all they [the Maoist fighters] are fighting for us,'" an appreciative attachment deriving from "a range of actions that were seen as broadly for a morally just cause."⁵⁹ And Kasper Hoffman, in his work

on the Mai Mai in eastern Congo, wrote of “the moral economy” of rebel governance. As he detailed, Mai Mai rebels justified their struggle as being in defense of a mythologized homeland endangered by foreign forces, and this justification drew on “common cultural and political values” from surrounding communities.⁶⁰ Scott, who employed the term decades earlier, described “the moral economy” as “a living normative model of equity and justice” that guided rural peasant life (and inspired rebellion) in Southeast Asia.⁶¹

This second form of solidarity may derive from or overlap with a given ideology, a set of notions about the wrongs of the current political system or the proposed features of a different one. That ideational commitment may correspond with religious precepts about the rightful nature of state–society relations, or they may cleave to secular understandings of how politics should be organized, whether democratic, Marxist, or ethnic, to name a few. But aspirational solidarity is, ultimately, about a shared sense of what the rebellious struggle aims to achieve. This is not to undercut the unifying capacity of ideology, including religious belief, which, as Ibn Khaldun understood it, enables people “to transcend jealousies and inspire them to fight for common goals.” And, indeed, Islamist conceptions of politics and law animated many rebel governors in Syria in terms that advantaged their organizations in certain ways. However, when it came to the shared solidarity of a revolutionary goal, some Islamists found more common cause with secularists than they did with fellow Islamists who sought confrontation with the West through the erection of a caliphate. In this sense, aspiration and ideology should not be conflated as they are not necessarily interchangeable political currencies.⁶²

We find Jean-Pierre Reed and John Foran’s concept of “political cultures of opposition” to be especially useful here, in that it reflects the necessary coming together of a number of psychic elements, “from historical memories of past conflicts to inchoate sentiments about injustice to long-standing religious idioms and practices to more formally elaborated political ideologies” for the “making of revolutions.”⁶³ We extend this concept into the realm of insurgent rule by asserting that the galvanizing “moral indignation, revulsion and fury with the powers-that-be,” of which Teodor Shanin wrote, push ordinary people out of their individual lives and into the collective.⁶⁴ Those who inhabit that insurgent collective translate their “diverse and complex value systems” into a set of aspirations for how they wish to be governed. The degree to which those aspirations align with the frames offered up by their leaders in turn determine the resonance of rebel rule in a given community.⁶⁵

Experiential Solidarity

In addition to kinship and aspiration-derived solidarities, we offer a third form: the affinity derived from the common set of experiences that arise during unrest. Given the nearness of death and the sense that those nearby are engaged in a shared struggle, a potent form of experiential solidarity is at play in communities struck by civil war. In this sense, as Steven C. Caton put it, *asabiyya* is “the closeness of the shared space.”⁶⁶ Asef Bayat, in his work on Arab street politics, described a process by which an imagined politics could take form through “the art of presence”: “to circumvent the constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discover new spaces within which to make themselves heard, seen, felt, and realized.”⁶⁷

Bayat was concerned with the “street” and then the “square” but, for many Syrians, the street and the square gave way to more sustained enclaves of togetherness. The experiences of those organizing, taking to the streets, enduring violence, and, ultimately, finding the means to manage their own affairs as a collective constituted a set of encounters that generated new solidarities. In her study of the Hizbullah-dominated al-Dahiyya neighborhood of Beirut, Lara Deeb explored shared sounds, sights, and practices that formed the greater mosaic of “textures” marking daily life. She noticed the ubiquity of photographs posted up throughout the neighborhood, in particular the images of martyrs that did the work of commemorating and, in fact, magnifying each individual sacrifice. But, as Deeb noted, they also reminded their viewers of the larger community to which every resident – dead and alive – belonged:

They become metonymic pieces of a collective and the whole itself – each in itself representative of the Resistance, and simultaneously each part of the inseparable whole that is the Resistance, along with all who have sacrificed for it, past, present or future . . . they memorialized the deaths of individuals while representing solidarity with the community epitomized by the lives that were sacrificed.⁶⁸

Deeb’s characterization of group prayer – thousands of worshippers on a single street – also captured the means by which a community like the Shi’i Lebanese of al-Dahiyya became “a single undifferentiated body of belief, utterance, motion and intent,” coalescing through their shared performance of piety.⁶⁹ The work of sharing, holding, and marking space and time could, in and of itself, instantiate new kinds of politics. In the Syrian context, the revolutionary project created sites and moments of new, shared experience, ranging from unfettered euphoria to devastating loss with the routine, necessary, and mundane in between. These were, to use Bayat’s words, “venues where people forge collective identities and

extend their solidarities beyond their immediate familiar circles to include the unknown, the stranger.”⁷⁰ If we, again, consider the wildest climes as analogous to the difficulties of life during war, there is arguably a special kind of Khaldunian bond that arises through the sharing of hardships, both profound and perfunctory.

The Possibilities (and Perils?) of a Khaldunian Approach

These solidarities – both predetermined and volitional – are forms of Tillian connection that are most salient for the rebel governor. They can exist distinct from one another, but they can also feed each other: inspiring messages delivered from a known messenger may take on greater heft, while shared experiences can deepen aspirational commitments as well as the bonds of long-standing relationships.⁷¹ Whether they are present alone or together, these solidarities are points of connectivity that derive neither from coercive power nor from wealth. Instead, they reside in the realm of the emotional and intellectual, the ideational and symbolic, and the social and psychological. In a given rebelscape, the density of these nonmaterial ties between rebel governors and their constituents will shape the contours of that relationship, including the means by which material forms of power, namely coercion and capital, are mobilized and managed.

Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* inspired a great many scholars in the centuries that followed its authoring. As Irwin noted, scholars have repeatedly picked up the work and concepts of this ancient thinker and employed them to varied ends, making “an Ibn Khaldun in their own individual image.”⁷² Arnold Toynbee, for example, understood the concept of *asabiyya* to be far more than a lubricant for nomadic, tribal politics, characterizing it as “the basic protoplasm out of which all bodies politics and bodies social are built up.”⁷³ We enter the Khaldunian fray aware of the paradox Michael Brett advanced: “That Ibn Khaldun continues to mean all things to all men is a measure of his greatness as well as his ambiguity.”⁷⁴

There may be scholars of Islamic studies and the Middle East made nervous by our application of this frame to the modern realm of rebellion, but we posit that a multidimensional notion of connective solidarity, inspired by Ibn Khaldun, has much to offer students of political violence.⁷⁵ We can make no claim to be scholars of the fourteenth-century Islamic world, so we acknowledge this caveat even as we embrace the encouragement of long-time students of Ibn Khaldun such as Alatas, who

argue for the import of engaging with his work as a theorist of violence, politics, and the state.⁷⁶ The Khaldunian concept of *asabiyya*, in particular, offers us a unique means of understanding governing authority during civil war. As Goodman explained, to see one's "hopes, fears, pride, wants, needs, or for that matter [one's] own shame, guilt, and responsibility" in the lives of others is to find a space of belonging. And thus, "by various fictions and extensions the relation grows to encompass wider groups."⁷⁷ In this sense, a recognized affinity moves the individual from the singular into the collective. When catalyzed, this type of solidarity "may be transmuted to a bond of loyalty among strangers."⁷⁸

The aggregation of different solidarities contributes to the construction of communities, both real and imagined,⁷⁹ and serves not only to organize but also to mobilize. In his work on rebellion, Roger Petersen identified a series of mechanisms that move people to join and then stay in the fight.⁸⁰ In this sense, we can conceive of *asabiyya* as an aggregation of those solidarities that can push people into a posture of action, as they are inspired to conceive of potentialities beyond the limits of their individual selves. Goodman described these connective brands of identification as "the substrate of political change," because they provoke newly dreamt-up possibilities: "only if men effectively enlarge the sphere of their subjective identities and subjectively perceived interests to someone or something beyond themselves can they be expected to risk death, to stand and fight rather than 'slink away.'"⁸¹ As Shanin put it, when writing of the "emotional upheaval" that revolution brings, "within its glow, for a while, men surpass themselves, breaking the shackles of intuitive self-preservation, convention, day-to-day convenience, and routine."⁸² Expansive imaginings, in this sense, beget committed resistance in the service of new forms of order.

THE ASSAD REGIME'S "FANTASIES OF ACCOMMODATION AND ORDER"

Before we can consider the relative connectivity of rebel institutions in Syria, we must reckon with the Assad regime's politics, and then with the reconfiguring of solidarities provoked in 2011. For an authoritarian ruler, one might imagine an ideal political scene to be one defined by limited forms of connectivity, all of which the regime can manage, if not define. At the same time, a successful atomization of the governed into a multiplicity of microconnections would preclude the emergence of any credible opposition. Indeed, scholarly descriptions of Ba'athist Syria suggest a

concerted effort on the part of both Hafez Al-Assad and his son, Bashar, to create and capture forms of solidarity that enabled ever greater legibility and obedience while simultaneously disrupting and immobilizing those that might pose a threat.

Coercion and capital no doubt played vital roles in the management of Syrian politics, but we will pay particular attention to the regime's relationship to Tillian connection in light of the revolutionary project that followed. In particular, we consider the different governing instruments the Assad regimes employed – accommodationist imagery, spectacle, cultish politics, fear, and divide-and-rule – to construct and then hold captive key forms of connection.

Both father and son worked to construct the image of a singular Syrian community with their family affixed at its center. The family portrayed itself as “the guarantor of this explicitly multisectarian order,” attached to “fantasies of accommodation and order” that ostensibly banished problematic fractures of tribe and sect.⁸³ Lisa Wedeen, in setting the scene on the eve of the uprising, described a set of interlinked promises of comfort, upward mobility, safety, and peaceful coexistence that tied Assad rule to “the good life.” In her words: “This good life entailed not only the usual aspirations to economic well-being but also fantasies of multicultural accommodation, domestic security, and a sovereign national identity, generating conditions for the sustenance of a neoliberal autocracy.”⁸⁴

The regime's politics also subdued alternate aspirations that might have animated conversations about movement beyond the status quo. People, quite literally, lost their voices for fear of the possible consequences of speech. As Wendy Pearlman recounted, “again and again, Syrians told me that they were raised on the warnings ‘Whisper! The walls have ears.’”⁸⁵ One Syrian writer reflected on the regime's imposition of an aspirational monotony meant to fill the silences: “The regime ‘cuts our wings’ and dictates the limits of our dreams . . . the ‘system’ has become the only possibility. The graveyard of ambition, of ideas, of innovation, of hope.”⁸⁶ Salwa Ismail described “the slippage in signification between leader and nation,” whereby they became one and the same through various practices of (forced) collective patriotism.⁸⁷

Beyond the assertion of kinship and aspirational homogeneity, the regime forced citizens to enact their national membership through various choreographed moments that summed to a universalizing experiential solidarity. The regime placed its ruler at the center of every salient site of public politics. The effect was routine demonstrations of compliance; in

Wedeen's words, "the cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior."⁸⁸ She chronicled a rich repertoire of ceremony, spectacle, and performance, a steady stream of devotional activity that consumed popular time and space in innumerable ways: "every citizen in every location of the political landscape, from those who admire Asad's political savvy to those who despise him, have been required to share in this experience of Asad's rule."⁸⁹

Wedeen concluded that, while many Syrians did not pledge genuine allegiance to the regime, they routinely acted "as if" they did. In so doing, their shared experiences made manifest the regime's domination over them.⁹⁰ In aggregate, these different strategies were an attempt to weave together various strands of connection – kinship, aspirational, and experiential – into a whole cloth. There was, in Tillian terms, an effort to construct a "single node" marked by the concentration of highly orchestrated forms of connection. The Assads sought to offer at least an appearance of a monolithic unified nation, whereby "everyone and everything" was bound together "into a single centralized system."⁹¹

Paradoxically, just as father and son routinely invoked a singular kind of Syrian solidarity, they also did the work of eroding, dividing, and subjugating those forms of connection that resided beyond their immediate grasp. At the other end of the Tillian spectrum, this was an effort to deconcentrate connection in all its untamed forms; to produce, in Tilly's words, "a population that resembles an evenly and intensely connected grid [that] combines lower communication and resistance costs with vulnerability to observation and infiltration by governmental agents."⁹² The Syrian regime worked, in effect, to insinuate itself into all kinds of networks, thereby rendering their memberships legible, splintered, and afraid.

In understanding Syrian history, scholars have relied on *asabiyya* to explain the tenacity of both regimes.⁹³ Hafez Al-Assad cultivated a sense of group solidarity around the Alawite minority, in part by assuring an overrepresentation of Alawites in the civil service and security apparatuses.⁹⁴ This kind of "sectarian *asabiyya*" helped to consolidate state power and authoritarian rule, and "knit" together the necessary repressive apparatus.⁹⁵ The regime's approach to tribal politics proved similarly fragmenting in its effects on kinship ties. Hafez Al Assad drew particular *sheikhs* into his orbit through patronage, enabling his government to manage the Syrian periphery through brokerage. His regime mobilized clients along axes of difference and, in so doing, exacerbated divisions

between Kurds and Arabs, for example, and secularists and Islamists.⁹⁶ As Haian Dukhan explained:

Despite its national slogans of “no sectarianism” and “no tribalism,” the Syrian regime did not hesitate to seek the aid of the tribes to suppress the uprising in 1982 in Hama . . . Moreover, Hafez al-Assad used the tribes to counter balance the Kurdish population in the northeast part of the country . . . Thousands of people mainly from Busha’ban tribe . . . have been encouraged to settle in villages built over Kurdish fertile lands in order to challenge the status quo of the region.⁹⁷

Bashar, according to Dukhan, maintained this tradition, utilizing political appointments and the like to elevate key members of the tribal elite in ways that, in fact, “debilitated the clientelist networks that connected the regime to society.”⁹⁸ Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, situating this approach in the longer history of Syrian state formation, characterized this kind of weakening as deliberate, the legacy of a well-honed tradition of divide-and-rule politics. The consequence, as they saw it, was the disabling of the tribes in their roles as capable units of social cohesion and conflict management.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Pearlman documented the regime’s instrumentalization of different forms of political fear, several of which produced a kind of isolating and paralytic hush within the citizenry. Fear did the work of forging distance between people. It limited their ability to express, confide, relax, and connect in manners of their own choosing. The regime made its way into even the most intimate of kinship circles, the nuclear family, creating gaps within these units through fear. One man recalled: “My father and brothers and sisters and I might be sitting and talking. And then each of us would glance at the other, as if to think ‘Don’t turn out to be security!’ By God, it’s just like George Orwell’s *1984*.”¹⁰⁰

And so, in the interest of preserving the existing order, citizens were both systematically pushed together and forced to remain atomized. The Assad regimes made brittle, hollow attempts at producing closeness, but the result must be understood as merely the performance of closeness. In the end, ordinary Syrians, operating in an environment of fear and surveillance, were stripped of the volition to connect on their own terms.

THE UPRISING AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF CONNECTION

In 2011, the regime’s iron grip on the ties that bound Syrians to one another loosened in the face of popular mobilization. Of course, the

effects of sustained authoritarian rule meant there were real limits on collective organization, many of which played out in terms we will explore in this book.¹⁰¹ And the regime never conceded its capacity to influence politics, not only through violence and patronage, but also in nonmaterial ways. Through the mobilization of symbols and narratives, the regime tapped into what Wedeen called “fundamental fantasy investments” on the part of elite and ordinary Syrians. This imagery kept many attached to the nebulous but resilient idea of “the good life” that would accompany regime survival.¹⁰²

Still, in Tillian terms, connection began to reconfigure itself. Singular nodes of connection, monopolized by the regime, confronted new contending claims, while preexisting networks of solidarity were activated despite the regime’s past efforts at divide-and-rule. A rich and variegated collection of relationships, aspirations, and experiences surfaced and gathered as the protests gained momentum. Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann wrote of the so-called early risers, noting the salience of rich social networks associated within those communities that became rebellious first-movers. The town of Dar’a, for example, did not represent an obvious point of political conflagration in Syria, given “popular perceptions of Dar’awis as benefitting disproportionately from the regime, or being inherently backward and submissive.”¹⁰³

Yet dense forms of connectivity marked this border town: Dar’a’s seven clans or houses served as a vital backdrop to the lived experiences of its townspeople. They shaped social, familial, and economic relations, managed conflict, settled disputes, and influenced professional and political trajectories. And they stretched beyond the borders of Syria, linking those inside with migrant communities living in other parts of the Middle East. Leenders and Heydemann characterized Dar’a as a town existing at the margins – geographic, economic, even legal – of Syrian society, suggesting that this marginality – sometimes glossed as “criminal” – primed Dara’awi social networks to be well-placed as protagonists in rebel politics.¹⁰⁴ The tribe served as a crucible for the production of a common code through which to respond to the extraordinary cruelty of the regime. When now-infamous intelligence chief Atif Najib responded to Dar’a elders’ requests for the release of imprisoned children with heartless vulgarity, respectable tribesmen could not abstain from participating in a response.¹⁰⁵ Leenders and Heydemann detected similar patterns of mobilization in Homs, Idlib, and Deir Az-Zur, where early protest was met with swift, decisive brutality on the regime’s part. As the regime responded, those communities hardest hit commenced new

experiential journeys that carried them from the exhilaration of mobilization into the suffering that followed.¹⁰⁶

The movement to the street meant a collective claiming of the square and produced a political crescendo not previously heard in Syria. The identification of “self” with “other” materialized through revitalized kinship ties and the mobilization of new aims and experiences. One protester later explained this phenomenon to Pearlman, recalling, “Something took shape in the minds of young people. It was as if they were sleeping and a new culture woke them up.”¹⁰⁷ Another described the audible communion that took hold in spaces – mental and physical – previously occupied by the oppressors. She characterized the experience of demonstrating as both emancipatory and reconstituting:

The sound rose until you heard it echo between the buildings. All the people living in the buildings came out to see what was going on . . . Your voice gets louder. You shudder and your body rises and everything you imagined just comes out. Tears come down. Tears of joy, because I broke the barrier. I am not afraid, I am a free being.¹⁰⁸

Her experience read as one of joining a new collective, an emergent community of people who had been living together but were meeting one another for the first time on these terms. This uprising was, as Pearlman put it, “socially embedded.” And, through this experience, “a Durkheimian ‘collective effervescence,’” protesters reframed their sense of belonging and, by extension, that which they would be willing to do for another. One Damascene student spoke of the difficult parting from his parents when leaving home to protest, fearing this might be goodbye: “But if I don’t sacrifice and other people don’t sacrifice, the revolution is dead. If someone else is going to sacrifice, he needs to feel my presence. There needs to be unity.”¹⁰⁹

And so began, for many Syrians, a new imagining of their solidarities with one another and the corresponding sacrifices that would mark their political lives. In these new “enactments of peoplehood and performances of the nation,” as Ismail described them, transcendent forms of connection took shape. These nascent ties began the work of undoing some of the atomization of authoritarian rule. Wedeen described a song, “Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar!” (“Go on, leave, O Bashar!”), that caught on as protests erupted in cities across the country. Those who sang it claimed its sentiment as their own while improvising in terms that reflected their particular sensibilities, concerns, and experiences.¹¹⁰

Demonstrations across Syria were connective, allowing dreams, emotions, and risk to traverse socio-geographical space. In so doing, they

became the basis for “new mental maps of the country” in the popular imaginary:

The continuous and sustained acts of protest are in some senses performances of the nation as a referential order that stands above communal identities . . . the residents of one town or city in a particular region of the country organised protests to show their solidarity with people protesting in other regions and being subjected to violent punishment as a result. In these demonstrations, people of one locale speak directly to those in other parts, reassuring them of their willingness to sacrifice their lives for them.¹¹¹

As Ismail explained, 2011 brought about, on the one hand, “a reimagining of the nation in terms that transcend narrow communal and religious identification. On the other hand, existing bases of association and engagement [we]re not wholly discarded and, indeed, constitute[d] important resources of the uprising.”¹¹² Unshackled, at least in part, from the regime’s dominant memes, the politics of protest moved between the general and the particular and back to the general as “the localities [became] integrated into the national imaginings through the narrative of acts of resistance.”¹¹³ An uprising of this kind represents “an exercise of political-community-making that entails a reimagining of the nation, in practices and discourse, in terms that counter and undo the regime’s practices of government and rule.”¹¹⁴ This reimagining, we argue, must be understood as the backdrop against which opposition institutions, including those that ruled in the midst of war, evolved after 2011.