

1 The al-Assad System

Instead of presenting an illusorily exhaustive study of Syrian society, the following analyses seek to identify the elements necessary for understanding the crisis that started in March 2011.¹ Nor will we try to set out a causal model from independent variables, but rather to describe a preliminary state that defines the conditions of possibility and probabilities of occurrence. Especially decisive for understanding the events that transpired starting in 2011 appear to be three issues: the new political economy of the 2000s, the identity regime, and the depoliticization of society.

The Political Economy of the Syrian Regime

On the eve of the 2011 revolution, Syria was plagued by social and economic tensions that affected its political system. The Syrian regime had essentially evolved from a “socialist” system, which characteristically included land reform, the marginalization of the bourgeoisie, and nationalization of the economy, to a neoliberal system that privatized entire sections of the economy for the benefit of those close to power at the expense of the middle and lower classes. The regime had also implemented delegated (“discharged” in Weber’s meaning of the term) basic governmental functions, sparing itself from having to structurally reform the state apparatus but fostering divisions and sectarianism.²

¹ For a general presentation of Syria, see Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *La Syrie au présent: Reflets d’une société*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2007; Fred H. Lawson, *Demystifying Syria*, London, Saqi Books, 2010; Chiffolleau Sylvia (ed.), “La Syrie au quotidien: cultures et pratiques du changement,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006.

² Here we use the concept of “discharge” as defined by Béatrice Hibou, that is the use of private actors by the State as the dominant mode of governmentality, see “Retrait ou redéploiement de l’Etat,” *Critique internationale* 1, 1998, p.154. On discharge in Syria, see Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, *op. cit.* On community-based management, see Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien*, Paris, Karthala, 2006; Cyril Roussel, *Les Druzes de Syrie: Territoire et mobilité*, Beirut, Presses de l’Ifpo, 2011.

The nationalization of the economy starting in the 1960s allowed marginalizing the old economic and social elites. When Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, he relied initially on the urban petty bourgeoisie, notably by enlarging the civil service.³ A connection to the ruling clique, as it were, conditioned the access to resources;⁴ for example, economic elites would be recruited from networks where top regime officials mixed with members of the security services.⁵ In the 1980s, Michel Seurat thus wrote that the “new bourgeois classes [. . .] grow not by controlling the means of production, but like parasitic classes attached to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. As for the latter, by definition it does not exist independently of the State at any level related to production.”⁶ In the perspective of a general theory of practices, a form of social capital (belonging to networks close to the government) is the direct means for economic accumulation. While, in contemporary Western societies social capital is often analyzed as secondary or derivative with respect to economic capital, here it comes first. The relationship to politics is that much more important in constituting the economic elites since Syria was a rentier society in the 1970s and 1980s, which derived its revenues from oil, from aid by the Gulf States, and from pillaging the Lebanese economy.

However, the economy on which this system was based began to weaken during the 1990s as the regime saw these sources of revenues shrink. First, the Gulf countries stopped sharing their oil revenues with Syria, solidarity between Arab countries and the confrontation with Israel no longer being a priority for them. In addition, Syrian oil production peaked in 1996, so much so that it became a net importer starting in 2006.⁷ Finally, the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005 deprived the regime of \$750

³ Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012.

⁴ The term “clique” refers to John A. Barnes, who used graph theory to describe groups founded on personal relations rather than similar status. John A. Barnes, “Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish,” *Human Relations* 7, 1954, pp. 39–58.

⁵ For members of the Syrian security apparatus, see Souhaïl Belhadj, “L’appareil sécuritaire syrien, socle d’un régime miné par la guerre civile,” *Confluences Méditerranée* 89 (2), 2014. For the economic elite, see Ali El Salah, “Les bourgeoisies syriennes,” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 771–778; Élisabeth Picard, “Syrie: la coalition autoritaire fait de la résistance,” *Politique étrangère* 4, 2005, pp. 755–768 and Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in . . .*, *op. cit.*, 2012.

⁶ Michel Seurat, “Les populations, l’Etat et la société,” in André Raymond, (ed.), *La Syrie d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1980, p. 128. Volker Perthes picks up the same theory fifteen years later, Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1995.

⁷ Samir Aita, “L’économie de la Syrie peut-elle devenir sociale? Vous avez dit: ‘économie sociale de marché?’” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 570.

million in annual revenues from smuggling along the so-called “Military road.” Army officers stationed in Lebanon lost several thousand euros of income per month. Money laundering through Lebanese banks ended, as did controlling drug production in the Bekaa, an activity the Damascus regime had subcontracted to the military in exchange for its loyalty.⁸

As explained by Elizabeth Picard, the Syrian regime in the 2000s experienced a profound transformation: “To reprise a comparison with other authoritarian regimes, in particular in the Arab region, the Syrian regime has entered a ‘post-populist’ phase where maintaining the privileges of the ruling group outweighs promises of growth.”⁹ The decrease in income in effect pushed the regime to liberalize its economy. The rise to power of Bashar al-Assad therefore coincided with an acceleration of reforms, initiated in 1991 with Law No. 10, which aimed to liberalize the Syrian economy and facilitate foreign investment.¹⁰ In 2000 and 2001, a series of laws paved the way for the emergence of a private banking system, a stock exchange, and private universities. In addition, the regime created special economic zones based on the Chinese model to attract foreign investment. It privatized many public enterprises, so that in 2007 the private sector accounted for 70 percent of economic activity.¹¹ Its share of imports rose from one-fifth in 1981 to four-fifths in 2003.¹²

Nevertheless, in Caroline Donati’s words, “the *infitah* process (liberalization) was always done with the utmost restraint and under supervision, the regime being anxious to keep control of the economic resources.”¹³ Thus, in the 1990s and 2000s, those close to power took control of entire sectors of the economy.¹⁴ “The regime liberalized the economy sector by sector. That way its members were able to maintain control” explained a businessman from Aleppo who had fled to Turkey, “one family, one of whose members was the Minister of Health, was able to develop a large pharmaceutical company, because part of its revenue was diverted directly to the clan in power.”¹⁵ Similarly, the establishment of the largest industrial zone in the country, Sheikh Najjar, on the outskirts of Aleppo,

⁸ Caroline Donati, *L’exception syrienne: entre marchandisation et résistance*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011, p. 149 and p. 171; Glenn Robinson, “Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession and Political Instability in Syria,” *Middle East Policy* 5 (4), 1998, pp.171–172.

⁹ Elisabeth Picard, *op. cit.*, p. 761.

¹⁰ Raymond A. Hinnenbusch, “The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (3), 1995, pp. 305–310 and “Syria: The Politics of Economic Liberalization,” *Third World Quarterly* 18 (2), 1997, pp. 249–265.

¹¹ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, pp. 211–244.

¹² Samir Aita, *op. cit.*, p. 562.

¹³ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Picard, *op. cit.*, pp. 759–761.

¹⁵ I-1, in Antakya, September 2014.

was accompanied by zoning manipulations benefiting important investors in the project that included the mayor and his allies.¹⁶ The economic opening resulted in widespread corruption with increased blurring of the distinction between public and private assets.¹⁷ Rami Makhoulf, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad, personifies these new arrangements. He controls SyriaTel, the largest mobile phone network, airport duty-free shops, the Syrian border posts, most of Byblos Bank; he has interests in oil and gas, cigarette imports, and garbage collection. Additionally, he heads up two consortia, Al Cham and Al Suriyya. The first brings together seventy members of influential families, who subscribed for a total \$350 million, the second grouping twenty-five heirs of the great families with a capital of \$80 million.¹⁸ Most State contracts were awarded to these companies, and foreign companies doing business in Syria had to make them shareholders. The Egyptian company Orascom Telecom eventually abandoned its 25 percent stake in SyriaTel because of excessive demands by Rami Makhoulf.¹⁹ Only international corporations were able to invest in the most profitable sectors (finance, luxury, tourism, land) in return for paying off people close to Bashar al-Assad.²⁰ In 2001, Riyadh Saif, owner of the Adidas franchise in Syria, was imprisoned for competing with Rami Makhoulf for the mobile phone franchise. Similarly, the Sankar family was forced into exile after a dispute involving award of the Mercedes franchise.²¹

By hijacking the benefits of economic reform, the regime abandoned public policies that had favored the lower classes.²² From the 1990s on, due to the economic difficulties and failure of the collectivization of the 1960s and 1970s,²³ the Syrian government was no longer investing sufficiently either in the newly urbanized or the rural areas.

¹⁶ Samir Aita, *op. cit.*, 541–580.

¹⁷ Bassam Haddad, “The Formation and Development of Economic Network in Syria: Implications for Economic and Fiscal Reforms, 1986–2000,” in Steven Heydemann (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 53–66.

¹⁸ Caroline Donati, “The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria: Liberalization and the Reconfiguration of Economic Networks,” in Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42.

¹⁹ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bachar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Paper 366, 2004, pp. 37–38.

²⁰ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

²¹ Fabrice Balanche, “Communautarisme en Syrie: lorsque le mythe devient réalité,” *Confluences Méditerranée* 89, 2014, p. 33.

²² Ignace Leverrier, “Les ressources sécuritaires du régime,” in François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²³ See Myriam Ababsa, “Agrarian Counter-Reform in Syria,” in Raymond Hinnenbusch (ed.), *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2011, p. 96 and “Le démantèlement des fermes d’Etat syriennes: une contre-réforme agraire (2000–2005),”

Unemployment, the regime's mismanagement of the drought of 2006–2010, and the lack of an urbanization policy were aggravated by the weak redistribution mechanisms.²⁴ On the eve of the revolution, the regime's presence in the villages and small towns were attenuated, particularly when compared to the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵ The influence of the Baath Party's satellite institutions, which had held sway over the population in the 1970s, three decades later was now diminished.²⁶ The party ceased to be a vector of social mobility²⁷ and its structures were no longer an essential resource for the political elites. Fabrice Balanche held that "Membership in the Baath is a prerequisite for access to the administration, [...] but it is no longer an honor."²⁸ In the same vein, a resident of Maraa, a small town in the north of the Aleppo governorate, states: "We officials, we were all Baath members. It was an effective way to be promoted within the administration. What mattered most was not to be political."²⁹ Thus, Damascus, with its population of 4.5 million in 2004, only had 29,000 active militants.³⁰ In the 2000s, Baath still had the members but few were believers.

The Syria of the 1990s and 2000s thus presented a paradox: an authoritarian regime pursuing the neoliberal policy of shrinking the State. However, as in Egypt and Turkey, Syrian cities were experiencing rapid growth.³¹ The continued impoverishment of the countryside that started in the 1980s and the droughts of the 2000s had accelerated a rural exodus whose effects were multiplied by an annual population growth of 2.5 percent projected to double the population every twenty

in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 739–745.

²⁴ Francesca de Châtel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Insurgency: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50 (4), 2014, pp. 1–15.

²⁵ Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999; Alasdair Drysdale, *Center and Periphery in Syria: A Political Geographic Study*, Thesis, University of Michigan, 1977; Raymond A. Hinnenbusch, "Local Politics in Syria: Organization and Mobilization in Four Village Cases," *Middle East Journal* 30 (1), 1976, pp. 1–24.

²⁶ Raymond A. Hinnenbusch, *Revolution from Above*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

²⁷ Eberhard Kienle, "Entre jamaa et classe: le pouvoir politique en Syrie contemporaine," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 59–60, 1991, pp. 211–239.

²⁸ Fabrice Balanche, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

²⁹ I-2, in Maraa, December 2012.

³⁰ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

³¹ The same phenomena are observed in Turkey, see Jean-François Pérouse (ed.), "Les tribulations du terme *gecekondu* (1947–2004): une lente perte de substance. Pour une clarification terminologique," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 1, 2004, <http://ejts.revues.org/117>, viewed January 7, 2016, and in Egypt, Patrick Haenni, *L'ordre des caïds: Conjurer la dissidence urbaine au Caire*, Paris, Karthala, 2005. An edited volume by Myriam Ababsa, Baudouin Dupret, and Eric Denis compares the Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian, Lebanese, and Turkish cases, *Popular Housing and Urban Land Tenure in the Middle East*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2012.

years.³² This growth primarily affected small rural towns,³³ whose populations have multiplied by five or even ten times since the 1980s. “The population of our city [al-Bab] has significantly increased, but no reforms have been made to accommodate the new people from the countryside. We lack schools, hospitals, and the electricity supply has not kept pace.”³⁴ The informal neighborhoods that sprang up in large cities like Aleppo and Damascus covered almost half their respective areas.³⁵ Finally, the influx of Iraqi refugees, with nearly 1.5 million recorded in 2007, accelerated urban growth and the rise in real estate prices.³⁶

The regime was incapable of implementing an urban planning policy,³⁷ leaving the new city dwellers to settle in overcrowded, often substandard, housing with limited access to public services.³⁸ In the informal neighborhoods, the regime assured itself in principle of the population’s docility by playing on their need to regularize the title to their self-built property and regulating their access to public utilities.³⁹ The strategy was not new, the regime since the 1960s having made use of manipulating administrative boundaries to assure itself of local support.⁴⁰ However, back then it could still guarantee creation of administrative jobs, which, forty years later, was no longer the case. Finally,

³² Myriam Ababsa, Cyril Roussel, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat, “Le territoire syrien entre intégration nationale et métropolisation renforcée,” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 37–78.

³³ Robert Goulden, “Housing, Inequality, and Economic Change in Syria,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38 (2), 2011, p. 195.

³⁴ I-3, leader of the al-Bab revolutionary city council, in al-Bab, December 2012.

³⁵ Franziska Laue, “Vertical Versus Horizontal: Constraints of Modern Living Conditions in Informal Settlements and the Reality of Construction,” in Myriam Ababsa, Baudouin Dupret, and Eric Denis (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³⁶ Reinoud Leenders, “Iraqi Refugees in Syria: Causing a Spill-over of the Iraqi Conflict,” *Third World Quarterly* 29 (8), 2008, p. 1567.

³⁷ Cha’ban Abboud, “Les quartiers informels de Damas: une ceinture de misère,” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 169–176.

³⁸ On the informal neighborhoods in Aleppo, see Balsam Ahmad, “Neighborhood and Health Inequalities in Formal and Informal Neighborhoods in Aleppo,” in Balsam Ahmad and Yannick Sudermann (eds.), *Syria’s Contrasting Neighborhoods: Gentrification and Informal Settlements juxtaposed*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2012; Fadi Hammal, Jeremiah Mock, Kenneth D. Ward, Fouad M. Fouad, Bettina M. Beech, and Wasim Maziak, “Settling With Danger: Conditions and Health Problems in Peri-Urban Neighborhoods in Aleppo, Syria,” *Environment and Urbanization* 17 (2), 2005, pp. 113–125.

³⁹ Fabrice Balanche, “L’habitat illégal dans l’agglomération de Damas et les carences,” *Revue géographique de l’Est* 49 (4), 2009.

⁴⁰ Fabrice Balanche, “La région côtière: d’une périphérie délaissée à une périphérie assistée,” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 89.

during the 2000s, informal crime control by neighborhood networks was another sign of the weakening State.⁴¹

From the 1990s onward, the economic crisis brought permanent impoverishment to the middle and working classes who had already suffered not only from the sudden liberalization of the economy but also from the stagnant private sector undermined by corruption.⁴² State employee salaries ranged from \$150 to \$300 a month: a factory worker earned approximately \$70. However, in 2007, the monthly living expenses in Damascus for a couple without children averaged over \$600.⁴³ Most men had a second or even a third job in the informal economy. Likewise, hundreds of thousands of Syrians each year poured into Lebanon looking for work.⁴⁴ The informal economy played a vital role for a large part of the population, which helps to explain why 60 percent of transactions were settled in cash. Nearly half of all agricultural jobs were illegal,⁴⁵ and smuggling (cigarettes, textiles) that often mobilized ethnic or tribal allegiances was rife in border areas,⁴⁶ while non-monetized barter of goods or services grew. If the informal economy allowed the population to survive, it put an additional strain on the state budget by reducing the tax base. At the same time, corporate taxation remained largely token.⁴⁷

In the end, it is clear a clique close to the regime purloined the national wealth.⁴⁸ The inequalities were even more strongly felt, given the conspicuous consumption by the elite⁴⁹ that paralleled them, and the increased access of the middle class to the Internet and mobile phone access to foreign media. The social gap was both wider and more obvious.⁵⁰ On the one hand, the internationalized elites close to the regime had passports, studied abroad, and were free to purchase

⁴¹ Zouhair Ghazzal, "Shared Social and Juridical Meanings in Aleppo Neighborhood," in Myriam Ababsa, Baudouin Dupret, and Eric Denis (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 169–202.

⁴² Raymond Hinnenbusch, "Syria: From Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution?" *International Affairs* 88 (1), 2012, pp. 95–113.

⁴³ For workers' salaries, Myriam Ababsa, Cyril Roussel, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat, *op. cit.*, p. 51; for civil servants', Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁴⁴ Fabrice Balanche, "La région côtière . . ." *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Samir Aita, *op. cit.*, p. 568.

⁴⁶ Cyril Roussel, "Reconfiguration des espaces transfrontaliers dans le conflit syrien," Noria-research, February 19 2014, www.noria-research.com/la-reconfiguration-des-es-paces-transfrontaliers-dans-le-conflit-syrien/, viewed February 25, 2014.

⁴⁷ Bassam Haddad, "The Formation and Development . . ." *op. cit.*, pp. 53–66.

⁴⁸ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, 2013, pp. 55–56.

⁴⁹ Leïla Vignal, "La 'nouvelle consommation' et les transformations des paysages urbains à la lumière de l'ouverture économique: l'exemple de Damas," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006, pp. 21–41.

⁵⁰ Leila Hudson, "Le voile et le portable: l'adolescence sous Bachar al-Assad," in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 303–304.

imported goods. By contrast, the children of the middle classes, often with diplomas but without economic capital, and the working classes living in informal settlements, saw their standard of living fall.⁵¹

The Identity Regime

The civil war is often presented as resulting from the multisectarian structure of Syrian society, a topic we will return to. Yet the undeniable importance of ethnic and religious memberships in any number of everyday situations did not imply *ipso facto* that communities were established political actors or that the State represented any one group despite its being perceived as Alawite. In reality, the Syrian regime perpetuated, or even aggravated, ethnic and religious divides as a means for ensuring its own survival.

Ethnic or sectarian identity played an important role in specific contexts, starting with marriage. Within communities, endogamy was indeed strong and perhaps growing. Catherine Dupret-Schepens shows that, in the mid-2000s, from a sample of thirty-three families or 3,332 individuals belonging to different ethnic and religious communities, intermarriage made up only 2.1 percent of all marriages, with 1.5 percent of intermarriages entered into abroad.⁵² Moreover, these couples, and even more so their children, faced rejection, often from their own families.⁵³ More generally, “in daily practices, mixing is far from the rule: a Christian will see a Christian doctor.”⁵⁴ Likewise, even the transportation system showed signs of sectarianism in Syria (Table 1.1, Map 1.1).⁵⁵

This endogamy is accompanied by each group in some way being concentrated in specific areas: the Druze in the south of the country, the Alawites to the west, the Kurds in the north and east and the Christians and Ismailis in the towns. These historical concentrations had, however, been turned upside down by urbanization. As an example, in 2011, most Kurds lived in Damascus and Aleppo, i.e., outside the predominantly Kurdish areas of the governorates of Aleppo and Hasaka where they had traditionally been concentrated. The significance of trans-sectarian interactions and the degree of ethnic or confessional homogeneity varied by

⁵¹ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, pp. 335–342.

⁵² Catherine Dupret-Schepens, “Les populations syriennes sont-elles homogènes?” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁵³ I-4, a Sunni woman married to an Alawite man, in Antakya, September 2013. For other examples, see A. M. Kastrinou Theodoropoulou, “A Different Struggle for Syria: Becoming Young in the Middle East,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (1), 2012, pp. 68–73.

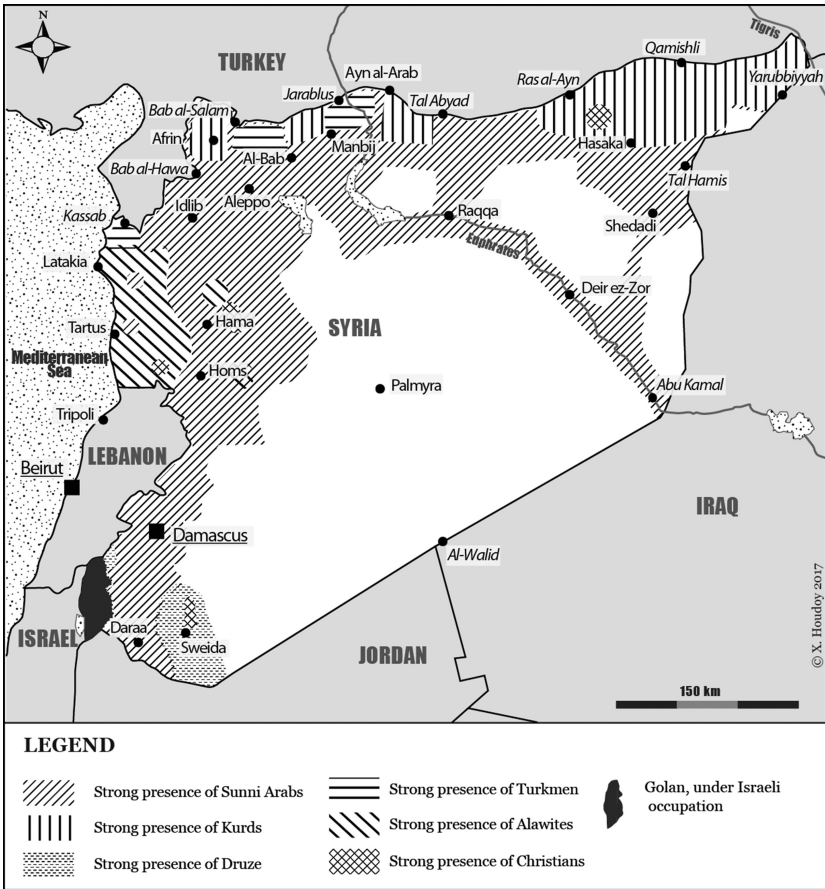
⁵⁴ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁵⁵ Fabrice Balanche, “Transports et espace syrien,” *Annales de Géographie* 112, n°630, 2003, p.165.

Table 1.1 *Ethnic and religious affiliation*⁵⁶

Group	Population in 1953 (000)	% in 1953	Population in 2004 (estimated) (000)	% in 2004 (estimated)	Multiplier between 1953 and 2004	Annual growth rate (%)	Population in 2012 (projected) (000)	% in 2012 (projected)
Arab Sunni	2,259	61.8	12,765	71.7	5.7	3.40	15,800	72.8
Arab Alawi	399	10.9	1,846	10.4	4.6	3.00	2,200	10.2
Kurds	248	6.8	1,450	8.1	5.8	3.46	1,800	8.3
Arab Christians	479	13.1	946	5.3	2.0	1.33	1,000	4.6
Arab Druzes	113	3.1	350	2.0	3.1	2.22	400	1.8
Arab Ismaelis	37	1.0	171	1.0	4.6	3.00	200	0.9
Turkmens	49	1.3	114	0.6	2.3	1.66	100	0.6
Arab Shiites	15	0.4	69	0.4	5.6	3.00	80	0.4
Cherkessians	23	0.6	68	0.4	3.0	2.13	80	0.3
Yazidis	3	0.1	14	0.1	4.7	3.02	20	0.1
Total	3,657	100.0	17,793	100.0	4.9	3.10	21,600	100.0

⁵⁶ The 1953 figures come from work by Etienne de Vaumas, used by Youssef Courbage. Those for 2004 come from the “evaluations carried out by specialists of Syria” and “the deduction of certain demographic parameters based on regional data.” The 2012 extrapolations are Youssef Courbage’s projections, based on the estimated figures for 2004. See, respectively, Etienne de Vaumas, “La population de la Syrie,” *Annales de géographie* 64 (341), 1955, pp. 74–80; Youssef Courbage, “La population de la Syrie: des réticences à la transition (démographique),” in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 189; Youssef Courbage, “Ce que la démographie nous dit du conflit syrien,” *Slate*, October 15, 2012, www.slate.fr/story/62969/syrie-guerre-demographie-minorites, viewed November 19, 2014.



Map 1.1 Ethnic and religious distribution in Syria

social class. Among university networks and internationalized elites, social contact among different communities was fluid.⁵⁷ Sunni and Christian entrepreneurs associated freely, sharing complementary networks. However, the informal settlements housing the working classes were more homogeneous. Still, even if some areas had a dominant community, one could not truly point to any regions as belonging to one or another community. Alawites were numerous on the coast, but many Sunnis and Christians also lived there.⁵⁸ In such cases,

⁵⁷ Ali El Saleh, *op. cit.*, p. 777.

⁵⁸ Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–19 and p. 173.

community membership conditioned professional occupation: In Latakia and in Baniyas, the Alawites often populated public service functions, while the Sunnis dominated trade and industry – a situation that led to tensions.⁵⁹

For myriad reasons, practices that were ostensibly sectarian proliferated in the decade prior to the 2011 Revolution. This was particularly evident among the Christians, who were deeply troubled by the Sunni revival in Syria and the fate of their Iraqi coreligionists. The Christian resurgence was evident in the Marian devotion of young girls or the increased attendance at church services. Religious festivals in Maaloula, tolerated by the regime, allowed for the reassertion of identity symbols such as crosses and bells as well as the consumption of alcohol.⁶⁰ Thomas Pierret highlights the increasing importance of religion among the Sunnis since the 1970s, demonstrated by the growing importance of the influential Sunni ulema.⁶¹ However, while the practice of Ramadan spread among the Alawites, this should not be seen as an assertion of identity (Ramadan not being observed by Alawites) but as an attempt to be acknowledged as Muslim by the Sunni and Shiites. Such alignment with orthodox practices could perhaps also be an indicator of the marginalization of a religious community whose existence was not officially recognized in the schools, where Islam and Christianity are the only recognized religions for instruction.

Worries about identity closely linked to collective communitarian memories, the regional situation, and the policies of the regime translated into increased tensions that escalated into clashes in 2005 between Ismailis and Alawites in Qadmous and Massiaf or the construction of a huge concrete Christ statue to be visible from neighboring Sunni communities. A cleric explained it thus to Caroline Donati: “The Christian fears or despises the Muslim, the Alawite feels rejected by the Sunni who despises the former as still a mountain dweller, and the Ismaili feel besieged by the Alawites.”⁶²

However, a significant part of the ruling elite inside the Syrian regime did come from the Alawite minority. During the Ottoman period, they had been marginalized, not officially considered Muslim by either Sunnis or Shias. Following the 1963 coup, the new regime, dominated by Alawite officers, upended the hierarchy between communities, with

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁶⁰ Sylvia Chiffolleau, “Fête et procession de Maaloula: une mise en scène des identités dans l’espace d’un village chrétien,” *Revue d’études des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006, pp. 176–89.

⁶¹ Thomas Pierret, “Les oulémas: une hégémonie religieuse ébranlée par la révolution,” in François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁶² Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 295, see also pp. 290–298.

the result – for reasons that were not exclusively sectarian – that the regime was never fully accepted by most Sunnis, including the former Ottoman elites who had dominated post-independence Syria.⁶³ In addition, decade by decade, demographic changes were shrinking the regime's base: "There is a dilemma here, rarely pointed out. The communities and the regions most securely held by the regime – the Alawite coastal mountains, Jabal Druze, Golan and Damascus – in principle were the most threatened by the explosive demographics of the majority. It would not be long before the loss of demographic heft reached other areas."⁶⁴

The regime therefore adopted a complex power-retaining strategy, based on a rapprochement between the Assad family and orthodox Islam, that saw the Alawite dominance preserved in the security area and representatives from all communities included in the power-holding clique. The Assad family had at first attempted to integrate the Alawites into the Shiite denomination. Under pressure from Syria, the Lebanese Shiite Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1973 had recognized the Alawites as Shiites.⁶⁵ Since the Syrian constitution required that the president be a Muslim, it was also a way for Hafez al-Assad to prevent having his legitimacy challenged.⁶⁶ During the 2000s, the regime had allowed Shiite proselytizing as part of a rapprochement with Iran. As a resident of Raqqa explained:

The Shia? Previously there were none in Raqqa. They were converted by the Iranians, who came in the 2000s to restore ancient shrines, the tombs of 'Ammar bin Yasser and of Uways Qarni. They lived scattered in the city suburbs. A Syrian who converted received 5,000 pounds a month, paid by Tehran. Many pilgrims from Iran went to Raqqa, they were recognizable because their wives wore an abaya [an Islamic woman's clothing article] that was different from the local one.⁶⁷

Following the conversion of several thousand people, the Sunni religious authorities asked Assad in 2008 to stop the Shiite proselytizing.⁶⁸ At the same time, the ruling family was also affirming its religious orthodoxy – by the marriage of Bashar al-Assad to a Sunni, the ruling elite attending

⁶³ Elizabeth Picard, "Fin de partie en Syrie," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 81–82, 1996, p. 207.

⁶⁴ Youssef Courbage, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 209.

⁶⁵ Martin Karmer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in Martin Karmer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1987, p. 246–249.

⁶⁶ In the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood demanded that the Constitution specify the Syrian president must be Sunni, Sabrina Mervin, "Des nosayris aux ja'farites: le processus de 'chiitisation' des alaouites," in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 359–364.

⁶⁷ I-110, in Urfa, September 2013.

⁶⁸ Fabrice Balanche, "Le communautarisme en Syrie: lorsque le mythe devient réalité," *Confluences Méditerranée* 89, 2014, p. 38.

public prayers in Sunni mosques, a practice dating to Hafez al-Assad's reign – and by maintaining relationships with Sunni ulema.⁶⁹ Far from representing the interests of the Alawite community, the Assad family sought to marginalize Alawite clerics in favor of their own clientele.⁷⁰ The community itself, however, remained poor and benefited only marginally from Assad's accession to power. Most Alawites were employed in the lower administrative echelons and were not paid more than the other civil servants.⁷¹

Nevertheless, the security institutions remained in the hands of the Alawites, a community not able to betray the regime. Entrusting security to a despised minority is a standard technique of imperial or multicomunitarian regimes. To keep up the appearance of openness, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad often made Sunnis Defense Minister and Chief of Staff, the most well-known being Mustafa Tlass, an early Sunni companion of Hafez al-Assad. In the same way, Ali Mamluk saw himself successively entrusted with different leadership positions in the Syrian security services. But even though the army and security services had many Sunnis, the Alawites maintained their dominance.⁷² Some Sunnis had command positions (Divisions 7 and 10 in 2011, Companies 554 and 636 of the Airborne Special Forces), but they were rather the exception, while the elite army units that protected the capital – the Special Forces Division, the Republican Guard, and the 4th Division – were in the hands of Alawites.⁷³ Lower-ranking Alawite officers from the Secret Services or the 4th Division often had more power than a Sunni general. In addition, the regime actively encouraged Alawite populations to settle in certain strategic Damascus suburbs.⁷⁴

However, the regime's functioning – except for the security apparatus – was multisectarian and membership in the ruling classes was based on political solidarity or economic interest more than belonging to the Alawite community.⁷⁵ The officers who took power in 1963 came from various communities, with the Baathist ideology serving as a link among

⁶⁹ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and the State . . . op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Bruno Paoli, "Et maintenant, on va où? Les alawites à la croisée des destins," in François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁷¹ Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite . . . op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁷² Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–52.

⁷³ Through interviews with defected officers in Turkey, Hicham Bou Nassif reconstructed most of the commanding positions during Bashar al-Assad's reign. Hicham Bou Nassif, "Second-Class: The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38 (5), 2015, pp. 626–649.

⁷⁴ Fabrice Balanche, "Clientélisme, communautarisme et fragmentation territoriale en Syrie," *A contrario* 11, 2009, p. 129.

⁷⁵ Bassam Haddad, "Syria's State Bourgeoisie: An Organic Backbone for the Regime," *Middle East Critique* 21 (3), 2012, pp. 231–257.

officers that transcended religious affiliation.⁷⁶ With the liberalization of the 2000s, Syrian politics continued to operate in favor of a multisectarian elite, with common economic interests replacing shared ideological beliefs.⁷⁷

In its dealings with the various communities, the regime reinforced vertical divisions by manipulating the notables. Thus, “Christians are torn between following a clergy close to power that is ready to compromise its principles but can help them in their daily lives, or succumbing instead to a pious, populist movement.”⁷⁸ As for the Druze, the regime would coopt the clan’s elite and in this way establish a form of indirect rule over the predominantly Druze area of Suweida province.⁷⁹ Similarly, the Sunni tribal elites, weakened greatly by detribalization policies of the 1970s and 1980s, were either assimilated or marginalized to the profit of the notables close to the regime. North of Aleppo, for example, the most influential members of the tribes and minorities were close to the regime. Near Azaz, the notables of the large tribes (Kenlo, Derbala, Amuri, Ayubi) cooperated with the regime to protect their economic interests and access to positions of power, including the Senate for the most influential among them. “In Aleppo, the government has partnered with two tribal leaders to exercise its control. Thus, the Berris hold the security apparatus of the city, while the Shehadé have a political role that includes a seat in parliament.”⁸⁰ As a further example, the tribal elites of Raqqa province, especially the Shawi, benefited significantly from the land privatization that accompanied Bashar al-Assad’s taking power.⁸¹

The situation of the Kurds shows clearly the shadowy manipulations of the regime’s identity politics.⁸² By the late 1950s, the Kurds were suffering from serious discrimination due to Syrian nationalism based on Arabism to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Thus, land reform, implemented in the rest of Syria, did not apply to Kurdish regions because it would have discriminated against Arab owners and benefited Kurdish peasants. Conversely, the government redistributed land in Kurdish regions to Arab settlers within the framework of the “Arab belt” policy

⁷⁶ Hanna Batatu, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

⁷⁷ Souhail Belhadj, *op. cit.*, pp. 340–343.

⁷⁸ Quoted by Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁷⁹ Cyril Roussel, “Les grandes familles druzes entre local et national,” *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006, pp. 135–153.

⁸⁰ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁸¹ Myriam Ababsa, “Contre-réforme agraire et conflits fonciers en Jazira syrienne (2000–2005),” *Revue d’études des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2007, pp. 211–230.

⁸² Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds, History, Politics and Society*, London, Routledge, 2009.

from 1961 on.⁸³ The most recent example was the restriction of Kurdish property rights (Decree 49 of September 2008). In addition, political parties and associations were banned from referencing Kurdish culture. Finally, some Syrian Kurds were denied Syrian nationality under the pretext of flushing out the Turkish Kurds who had illegally crossed into the country via the Turkish-Syrian border. In 1962, the government thus lifted Syrian citizenship from over 120,000 people in the Jazeera region.⁸⁴ The Kurds had their foreign (*ajnabi*) status formalized via a red identity card. It was transmitted from parent to child, affecting hundreds of thousands of people by the late 2000s.⁸⁵ Besides being denied the vote, the stateless Kurds were precluded from owning property, managing a business, owning a passport, or holding office.

These discriminatory measures strengthen the Kurdish sense of identity,⁸⁶ but there were still obstacles to its transformation into political mobilization. First, the Kurds did not occupy a homogeneous area. Their claims could not therefore be constructed with reference to a territory.⁸⁷ They were found in pockets along the Turkish border, several villages north of Aleppo, and in several districts in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. The Kurdish character of certain areas, the Jazeera, Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), and Afrin, was unquestionable but they were too small and distant from each other to allow for a separatist strategy. In addition, the overwhelmingly Kurdish districts within Aleppo and Damascus (home to most Syrian Kurds) were contained within a predominantly Arab environment.

Faced with the regime's crackdown, the increasingly isolated Kurdish parties were forced into exile. A party like the Syrian branch of KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party – *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistane*), created in 1957, might operate underground but had little influence inside Syria. "In the 2000s, the political parties have never really supported us," explained a politically unaffiliated Syrian Kurdish protester. "They were not on the ground in Syria, and even from outside, they urged us to show restraint and refused to help us, to keep from antagonizing the regime."⁸⁸ The regime would instrumentalize Kurdish figures, notably clerics from religious brotherhoods, such as Ahmed Kuftaro, the Grand Mufti of the Republic (1964–2004), and Muhammed Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti. The regime also recruited certain Kurds into the military, notably into the Presidential Guard, and

⁸³ This policy aimed at settling Arab Syrians in the Northern borderland to control these areas and prevent the formation of a Kurdish homogeneous region.

⁸⁴ Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds, History . . . op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸⁷ Cyril Roussel, "La construction d'un territoire kurde en Syrie: un processus en cours," *Maghreb-Machrek* 213 (3), 2012, pp. 83–98.

⁸⁸ I-5, in Erbil, December 2012.

used Kurdish militias against the Muslim Brotherhood in 1980 in Aleppo and in 1982 in Hama.⁸⁹

The regime manipulated the PKK to monitor Syrian Kurds and to destabilize Turkey. After leaving Turkey in 1979, the leadership of the party was based in Syria until the late 1990s. At that time, Syrian Kurdish organizations faced severe repression, but the PKK was free to recruit Syrian Kurds with the proviso that they would not act inside Syria itself.⁹⁰ The presence of the PKK and its collaboration with the regime made any significant mobilization of Syrian Kurds difficult. "The PKK was working hand in hand with the regime. Instead of doing your military service for the Syrian state, you could serve within the ranks of the PKK. If someone was opposed to the regime, it was the PKK who denounced him and had him arrested."⁹¹

In 1998, bowing to pressure from Turkey, Hafez al-Assad expelled Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, at the same time as the Syrian security services dismantled the PKK's structures in Syria and arrested hundreds of militants. Despite the creation of a Syrian branch under the name PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party) by 2003, the PKK was losing influence. This led to a renewed mobilization among the Kurdish population. The protest, which started in Qamishli, is emblematic of the rise of Kurdish protests in 2004. Faced with Kurdish demonstrators demanding civil rights, Damascus could stop the movement only with a brutal crackdown that resulted in dozens of deaths. The regime also relied on recently settled Arabs in Kurdish regions to attack protesters that were accused of holding separatist ambitions backed by the West.⁹² In opposing the regime, Kurdish protesters remained isolated with demands that did not resonate with the Arab population.⁹³ Mobilization was confined to certain Kurdish localities in the Jazeera, in eastern Syria, where security forces were sparser. In Damascus and Aleppo, the regime easily controlled demonstrations that originated in Kurdish neighborhoods. "In 2004 we stood alone against the regime. I was a supporter of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, Yekitiya Nistimani Kurdistane), but the party did not help us. Our mobilization was spontaneous, without organization. With

⁸⁹ Jordi Tejel, "Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la 'dissimulation' à la 'visibilité'?" *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006, pp.117–133.

⁹⁰ It is estimated that between 7,000 and 10,000, Syrian Kurds were killed in the confrontations with the Turkish army, Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds, History . . . op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁹¹ I-6, a Syrian Kurdish militant, in Erbil, January 2012.

⁹² Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds, History . . . op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁹³ Jordi Tejel, "La jeunesse kurde entre rupture et engagement militant," in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Mujahidin, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 270.

friends, we went down into the streets to protest.”⁹⁴ While Kurdish demonstrations failed, they did, however, foreshadow the 2011 movement by their spontaneous nature, the absence of political groupings, and the difficulty the regime had in maintaining control in peripheral areas. Prior to 2011, the regime had created vertical social divisions to avoid widespread protest and had used selected communitarian relays to ensure it remained in control.

A Depoliticized Society

From its inception, the Baathist regime systematically monitored the population, and any form of dissent was brutally and immediately suppressed. Dwindling resources and demographic changes had progressively weakened the system: While the Syria of 2011 was effectively a police state, it was hindered by its own lack of resources. Starting in the 1980s, the state had left certain urban and rural areas under-administered. The Aleppo governorate had less than one police officer per five hundred inhabitants.⁹⁵ The situation was worse in the informal neighborhood of Salahaddin (population 100,000) in Aleppo city, which did without a single police station. Similarly, “in our [al-Sukari] neighborhood, there were very few security forces. We had about 40 police officers and 50 to 100 auxiliaries per 300,000 inhabitants.”⁹⁶ The town of Maraa had roughly fifty police officers for more than 40,000 inhabitants, less than one police officer per thousand.⁹⁷

The security services had two major functions: the control of institutions and the elimination of dissent. On the one hand, the multiplicity of security agencies each monitoring the other was to prevent a *coup d'Etat* by preventing a concentration of power. On the other hand, almost the entire state apparatus was involved in spying on the population to forestall a mobilization, mainly by using *mukhtars* (the representative of the state at the local level).⁹⁸ In buildings, the security services invariably enlisted the caretakers for spying on the residents.⁹⁹ By working in this fashion, the

⁹⁴ I-6, in Erbil, January 2012. The PUK, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yeketiya Nistimani Kurdistan), was founded in 1975 in Syria by Iraqi Kurds.

⁹⁵ The governorate had 9,000 police officers for 4.7 to 4.8 million residents in 2011 (our projection of the 2004 census figures, based on the annual growth rate). For the police figures, interview with former regime police officers, in Aleppo, January 2013.

⁹⁶ I-7, in Aleppo, December 2012.

⁹⁷ I-8, in Maraa, December 2012.

⁹⁸ The one in Aleppo's Bab al-Qadim district denounced the protesters; he was condemned to six months in prison by the Free Syrian Army after the district was taken by the FSA in September 2012. I-9, in Aleppo, August 2013.

⁹⁹ I-10, in Gaziantep, September 2013.

regime bought repression on the cheap.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, torture and disappearances were used strategically to send a stark warning to anyone contemplating resistance and to dissuade them from taking individual action.¹⁰¹

To stifle any kind of opposition, the regime strove to destroy, control, or coopt all key actors – unions, tribes, ulemas, and intellectuals – with any potential for mobilizing the population. This resulted in weakening these and other fields institutionally, leaving them with little independence vis-à-vis the ruling clique. The internal logic in various fields (cultural, economic, religious) was permanently biased by political or security considerations. Proximity to the intelligence services bestowed more influence than could any position within the official institutional hierarchy. For example, the principal of a school in Maraa was obliged to accommodate himself to the school janitor, who was well connected with the party and security services.¹⁰² Even within the Baath party, the support of one of the security institutions was essential to getting promoted. The net effect, even before the crisis of spring 2011, was that Syrians were leading their daily lives in a context of weakened institutions undermined by the security apparatus and patronage networks.

However, starting in the 1990s, the regime's economic weakness significantly undermined its control of the population. Certain fields – religious, cultural, civil society – increased their autonomy, both in daily operations and with respect to their internal organization. During the 2000s, several researchers countered the perception of an all-powerful regime by endeavoring to depict the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the ulama and certain civil society organizations. This same observed condition – functional autonomy coupled with tight control – applied in the cultural field.¹⁰³ Cécile Boëx shows how intellectuals, entangled with the regime, could up to a point “criticize the political order through their art”

¹⁰⁰ Jordi Tejel, “Les Kurdes de Syrie . . .” *op. cit.*

¹⁰¹ See the numerous prisoner reports: Moustafa Khalifé, *La Coquille. Prisonnier politique en Syrie*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2007; Aram Karabet, *Treize ans dans les prisons syriennes. Voyage vers l'inconnu*, Actes Sud, 2013.

¹⁰² I-11, with a Maraa resident, in Maraa, December 2012. In the same way, Belhadj relates the example of a senior civil servant who feared “his personal secretary or the young courier on his floor or even the colleague he talks with every day,” Souhail, Belhadj, *op. cit.*, pp. 318–319.

¹⁰³ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and the State . . . op. cit.*; Mathieu Le Saux, “Les dynamiques contradictoires du Shamp associatif syrien,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 115–116, 2006, pp. 193–209; and Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal, “State/Charities Relation in Syria: between Reinforcement, Control and Coercion,” in Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal and Tina Zintl (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2012; Cécile Boëx, “The End of the State Monopoly over Culture: Toward the Commodification of Cultural and Artistic Production,” *Middle East Critique* 20 (2), 2011, pp. 139–155.

but were “essentially pawns in a strategy that avoided any direct confrontation with the government.”¹⁰⁴ To paraphrase Fawwaz Haddad, a Syrian writer may be freer in his novels than outside them,¹⁰⁵ but, as Caroline Donati concludes, while “[. . .] the artists produce original work of high quality, it is rarely subversive, and they are ultimately controlled by their paymasters that are invariably from, or related to, the regime.”¹⁰⁶

The religious field had the most autonomy, because the regime could not interfere in the education of the ulama and, ever since the Islamic awakening, religious leaders negotiated from a position of strength.¹⁰⁷ As Thomas Pierret explains, “the religious field is managed by the State for purely ‘negative’ reasons. That is, it is focused on neutralizing security threats which could derive from it.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Salqini, a member of a large family of ulama and close to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, could be the Mufti of Aleppo in 2011.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, as we have seen, Bashar al-Assad sought to project himself as Sunni to the public. In the 2000s, clerics were gaining influence in education, charitable works, and the media. By exploiting the social capital of the ulama and financed by private entrepreneurs, the Zayd foundation became the largest charitable organization in Damascus and managed to negotiate a certain degree of autonomy.¹¹⁰ Despite this, after 2008, Bashar al-Assad’s regime would tighten its control over the religious field. Educational institutes directly controlled by the regime were created, and several religious leaders who had dared criticize the regime were jailed, among them the son of the former Grand Mufti Salah al-Din Kuftaro.¹¹¹ How effective this strategy was became evident by the time of the protests in 2011: Most of the important sheikhs and imams from the mosques were now closely collaborating with the security apparatus.

The regime had succeeded in producing a depoliticized society in which political organizations were disconnected from the rest of society. This created a gulf between the authorities – designated as they were by an opaque process – and the population. The elections in Syria were a formality, not a

¹⁰⁴ Cecil Boëx, “Mobilisations d’artistes dans le mouvement de révolte en Syrie: modes d’action et limites de l’engagement,” in Amin Allal and Thomas Pierret, *Au cœur des révolutions arabes: devenir révolutionnaire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013, pp. 87–112.

¹⁰⁵ Max Weiss, “Who Laughs Last: Literary Transformation of Syrian Authoritarianism,” in Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (eds.), *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 152.

¹⁰⁶ Caroline Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and the State . . . op. cit.*

¹⁰⁸ See Thomas Pierret, *Les oulémas syriens aux XXe-XXIe siècles*, Thesis, Sciences Po Paris – UCL, 2009, p. 78.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Pierret, “Syrie: l’islam dans la révolution,” *Politique étrangère* 4, 2011, p. 886.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ Thomas Pierret, “The State Management of Religion in Syria,” in Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 99–101.

real competition for office, the Baath party allies being mere satellites offering no political alternatives. “In January 2011, just before the revolution,” confides a resident of Aleppo, “the mayor of Aleppo was suddenly changed, without anyone knowing why. But this type of event was not unusual; the political system was closed in on itself, and the people had very little information about its leaders.”¹¹²

Moreover, the Baathist regime had in effect eliminated independent political movements. The repression was particularly successful, since, on the eve of the protest movement of 2011, no organized political opposition existed in Syria. After the repression of the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood and the left-leaning parties were marginalized.¹¹³ Also, the Kurdish protest in 2004 had served only to reveal the weakness of Syrian Kurdish parties.¹¹⁴ How ineffective the dissident movements inside Syria were became apparent with the “Damascus Declaration” of 2005, a document worked up by a platform of intellectuals, dissidents, and political parties which, however well-represented it was abroad, merely called for regime opening.

The inability of the institutional actors to lead any form of protest had two consequences: high initial costs for the protesters and the rapid spread of the unrest due to a lack of representatives able to articulate sectorial, negotiable demands.

¹¹² I-12, in Aleppo, January 2013.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Picard, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 221.

¹¹⁴ Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds, History . . . op. cit.*, p. 85.