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Regime Elite Turnover in the Waning Syrian Civil War (2016-2021)

A Socio-Economic Approach**

تحولات نخبة النظام الحاكم في الحرب الأهلية السورية (2016-2021)

مقاربة سوسيو-اقتصادية

Abstract: This article presents an analysis of changes that occurred in the landscape of the political and economic elites during the Syrian Civil War and focuses in particular on transformations that ensued once the regime's focus turned away from winning the war and toward consolidating power. It argues that weak leaders operating in networks where regime elites are fractured can find themselves in a state of "precarious stability", where there is no need to immediately engage in power–sharing with elites but the potential for elite networks to evolve into a threat is high. In such cases, leaders are motivated by strategic incentives to make frequent changes to the elite landscape to prevent powerful networks from arising within the regime. This empirical analysis provides evidence that the Syrian regime's efforts to maintain Assad's rule have been characterised by drastic repeated changes to both who is favoured and the extent of their reach within Syria.

Keywords: Elite Networks, Power Sharing, Syrian Civil War, Syrian Government.

الملخص: تقدّم هذه الدراسة تحليلًا للتغيرات التي طرأت على مشهد النخبة السياسية والاقتصادية، إبّان الحرب الأهلية السورية، وتركز خصوصًا على تلك التبدلات التي عاشتها هذه النخبة مع تحوّل تركيز النظام الحاكم من الانشغال بكسب الحرب إلى العمل على تعزيز سلطته. تجادل الدراسة بأن الزعماء الذين يمرون بفترة ضعف ويعملون ضمن شبكات من النخب الممزقة قد يجدون أنفسهم في حالة من «الاستقرار المتزعزع». في هذه الحالة، لا تكون هناك حاجة مباشرة إلى مشاركة السلطة مع النخب، ولكن يرتفع احتمال تطور شبكات النخب هذه لتشكل تهديدًا. في حالات كهذه، تدفع الحوافزُ الاستراتيجية الزعماءَ لإجراء تغييرات دورية في مشهد النخبة، وذلك للحيلولة دون صعود شبكات نافذة داخل النظام الحاكم، تحدّ من مجال مناوراته السياسية. تُقدِّم هذه الدراسة، اعتمادًا على تحليل إمبريقي، دليلًا على أنّ جهود النظام السوري للإبقاء على حكم الأسد كانت قائمة على إجراء تغييرات جذرية متكررة، مسّت على حدّ سواء أصحاب الامتياز في النخبة، وحدود امتداد نفوذهم داخل سورية.

كلمات مفتاحية: شبكات النخب، مشاركة السلطة، الحرب الأهلية السورية، الحكومة السورية.

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Introduction

The boundaries of coercive authority are stabilising among the competing forces in Syria's civil war, which has turned in the regime's favour, yet the Assad regime's elites find themselves in a tumultuous situation. Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, a seemingly constant stream of names has risen to prominence only to be replaced by others. This has been paired with equally significant and related shifts in the allocation of political power within the regime. While the intensity of the war in Syria has decreased, the intensity of conflict between regime-aligned elites appears to be gaining momentum. Much like earlier periods of political turmoil in Syria, the political, social and economic elite landscape is undergoing transformations that may have long-lasting effects for the political fabric of society. While popular discourse on Syria's economic sphere has focused on who has become dominant, one of the core implications of the argument set forth below is that the rise of a new economic hegemon is unlikely so long as the governing regime persists in its current form.

As the regime's coercive comparative advantage has grown over its domestic rivals, its focus has turned from defeating threats to the regime to preventing threats from arising within the regime.[1] These efforts initially focused on the consolidation of the decentralised tentacles of the armed elements ostensibly fighting on behalf of the regime, but they have increasingly involved actions meant to alter the political and economic landscape. These attempts to neutralise potential threats to the regime have been extensive, yet they have largely been characterised by targeted actions and overhauls of elite political and economic networks rather than the recentralisation of authority.[2]

This article provides an examination of the evolution of the elite landscape in Syria and the current battles being waged internally within the regime. It tests the limitations of the concept of leaders consolidating power in authoritarian regimes and, building on the concept of consolidating power, the study applies a two-dimensional framework to explore the centrality of the leader's position within the ruling network and the strength of elite networks.

After providing a conceptual distinction between the Consolidation of a Leader's Power, Power Sharing Arrangements, and a State of Precarious Stability, the paper theorises how a leader in a precariously stable position might strategically behave and explores this theory through the Syrian case. As with other periods of political instability in Syria's history, the country's economic and political elite landscape is rapidly evolving. While Bashar al-Assad's ability to maintain power in the long-term is far from a foregone conclusion, the regime in recent years appears to have been intentionally inducing instability into the elite networks in order prevent the rise of viable competitors. As such, Assad's short-term strategy to maintain power appears to be aimed at destabilising elite networks within his regime rather than stabilising the current order.

The Consolidation of Power and Elite Stability

All leaders require the cooperation of a subset of individuals from within society to remain in power. This is the case whether we conceptualise such a group using the language of Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's "Selectorate Theory"[3] by referring to them as the winning coalition or if we define them in terms of the institutional arrangements that characterise a regime, such as those offered by Barbara Geddes or Milan

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[1] Haid Haid, "Reintegrating Syrian Militias: Mechanisms, Actors, and Shortfalls,"*Carnegie Middle East Center*, 12/12/2018, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/34AfXbI

[2] This has included reconstructing who is allowed to win seats in parliament. See: "dimāʾ jadīda fī majlis al-shaʿb al-sūrī taʿkis muḥāṣṣa rūsiyya īrāniyya,"*Enabbaladi*, 26/7/2022, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/34GpNZl

[3] Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge/ London: MIT Press, 2005).

Svolik.[4] Within all regimes there is an elite group that is entrusted to carry out the functions associated with maintaining the leader's authority. Going back to the prevailing institutional conceptions of regimes, this study defines the regime as the structure of power distribution within the state. However, instead of a rigid focus on institutional characteristics in order to understand the process of power distribution, regimes are characterised by the structures of governing networks that control the state and its characteristics. Thus, this concept can be considered an extension of the institutional concept of political regimes.[5]

Elites within a society are defined by their "disproportionate control over or access to a resource"or institution.[6] The definition of elites used in this article is broad, encompassing those whose comparative advantage lies in their access to coercive apparatuses, economic opportunities and wealth, government institutions and social capital. For the discussion that follows, the subset of individuals whose cooperation with the regime plays a fundamental role in the regime's persistence shall be considered regime elites. Regime elites can operate within the public or private realm, yet they all wilfully and consistently play some role in helping the regime and its leader persist. It is through the dependence of the regime on them and the advantages that they are afforded that they are also the greatest threat to a leader.[7]

An autocratic leader's longevity in office does not imply the consolidation of that leader's power within the regime. While recognising that the specific arrangements that characterise regimes are varied, the relative strength of leaders and the relationship between leaders and elites have generally been conceptualised using unidimensional scales or binaries by scholars.[8] Most recently, in a methodologically innovative article, Jennifer Gandhi and Jane Sumner attempted to measure regime consolidation as a latent trait utilising Item Response Theory.[9] In their view, autocratic leaders who remain in power can do so in two types of arrangements.[10] The first type of arrangement is one where leaders forge power sharing agreements with regime elites whereby they institutionally constrain themselves and are forced to share in both decision-making and the spoils of the state.[11] The second type of arrangement is one where the leader consolidates power by weakening the elites through purges and targeted actions.[12] While a leader who has consolidated power is relatively strong within the system, and those who share power are relatively weak, both arrangements can produce leaders who remain in power for long durations.

Although the conceptualisation offered by Gandhi and Sumner, as well as others, is both reasonable and theoretical useful, there is room for adding nuance in describing power relations between elites and leaders. In particular, a leader who enjoys a significant advantage over elites may still find himself to be in a precarious situation due to his own weakness in absolute terms. Such situations may provide the impetus for elites to attempt to form networks that could potentially challenge the regime in the near future. While a ruler who is consolidating power may find himself facing a similar situation, once power has been consolidated, the potential for challengers from within the regime should diminish significantly.

The state of precarious stability that weak leaders relying on a fractured and decentralised network of elites find themselves in may be one characterised by persistent burgeoning threats. They are stabilised by

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[4] Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright & Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set,"*Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2014), pp. 313-331; Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[5] We acknowledge the validity of other concepts, such as those put forward by Adham Saouli and Raymond Hinnebusch in: Adham Saouli & Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Arab State: A Historical Sociology Approach,"*Almuntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 1 (April/May 2022), pp. 8-28.

[6] Shamus Rahman Khan, "The Sociology of Elites,"*Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 38 (August 2012), pp. 361-377.

[7] Svolik.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jennifer Gandhi & Jane Lawrence Sumner, "Measuring the Consolidation of Power in Nondemocracies,"*The Journal of Politics*, vol. 82, no. 4 (October 2020), pp. 1545-1558.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

the absence of viable rival networks in the status quo, and yet destabilised by the possibility of networks being formed that could confront the leader. In doing so, its leaders may have to deal with persistent and growing threats. As such, an arrangement where leaders do not feel compelled to share power with regime elites yet are persistently faced with manageable threats is plausible. This paper contends that this precarious stability has characterised Bashar al-Assad's position within his regime since the tide of the war turned in his favour, or perhaps even since the outbreak of war itself.

How do leaders manage threats when finding themselves in a state of precarious stability? One potential strategy is to continuously manipulate the elite landscape so that networks that may threaten the leader do not arise. When unable to engage in a large-scale purge of elites, yet also capable of maintaining power due to the inability of elites to coordinate around an alternative, leaders can attempt to produce constant change in both the composition and fortunes of regime elites. Moreover, by allowing for the possibility that regime elites who have fallen out of favour will see their fortunes improve later, leaders can dampen the drive to fight back against any actions taken against them. Thus, leaders can find themselves in a position where there are incentives to frequently manipulate elite networks in order to maintain their rule without entering into implicit or explicit power sharing agreements.

Research Design

The empirical analysis that follows examines the historical and contemporary patterns of elite-leader relations in Syria. The analysis employed is generally qualitative in nature, examining the theoretical predictions and conceptualisation presented above in relation to the Syrian case by analysing the patterns exhibited in the data and relying on counterfactual reasoning to establish the plausibility of the theory relative to alternative theories. The case of Syria represents what has been called an "extreme on the independent variable"case, and the independent variable is the intersect of having a weak leader and a fractured regime elite network.[13] The evidence presented is merely an examination of the plausibility of the theory and an exploration of the path from the state's precarious stability to regime elite turnover, and the empirical examination carries this caveat.

Time is an essential component here; had Bashar al-Assad's leadership become precarious during the civil war, economic and political elites aligned with the regime would be expected to shift immediately after the outbreak of the war. Specifically, we anticipate the disruption of the pre-war political elite as a result of Bashar al-Assad's efforts to weaken political networks in conjunction with strengthening the networks of the economic elite. In the post-war period, we predict the weakening of pro-regime economic elite networks without being accompanied by the strengthening of political elite networks. In other words, this paper argues that the economic and political networks did not simultaneously experience high levels of change after the war. Exploring the temporal variation in Assad's consolidation of power and the regime's elite networks would open the door to further theoretical exploration of these dynamics.

The historical overview primarily relies on secondary sources to lay the foundation for the examination that follows. After the historical discussion, the article will examine patterns of elite turnover among Syria's political and economic elite. The analysis of political elites will focus on turnover in Syria's cabinet and the parliament, particularly the period from 2016-2021. Both datasets employed are parts of original data collection projects that aim to organise and make data on Syrian political institutions readily available to

[13] Jason Seawright, "The Case for Selecting Cases that are Deviant or extreme on the Independent Variable,"*Sociological Methods & Research*, vol. 45, no. 3 (April 2016), pp. 493-525.

scholars. The data on Syrian cabinets used the data provided by the WhoGov dataset as a base,[14] filling in missing governments and correcting errors in the dataset based on primary sources. The data on Syria's members of parliaments was drawn from election results posted on the *Syrian Arab News Agency – SANA* and the Syrian parliament's official website. The examination of the regime's economic elites focuses on the upper echelons of the regime's economic actors and the regime's interactions with them.

Historical Overview: Syria's Economic and Social Elites in Politics

While the historical political significance of local notables in Syrian politics began well before the French mandatory period, the mandatory period played an important role in shaping intra-regional elite cooperation.[15] The resistance to French occupation provided the impetus for unified political cooperation organised under the umbrella of the "National Bloc". Although internal divisions manifested themselves in various ways during this period of time, the resistance to colonial rule played an important role in providing some semblance of unity. With independence came the increased salience of the political cleavages that divided the landed aristocracy of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs from the Damascus bourgeoisie. Although the pervasive political instability of post-independence Syria left little room for consistently dominant political movements, and plenty of room for periodic military intervention, national political leadership was largely led by individuals from a small set of elite families from the regions noted above.[16] The nascent institutions of the central government that these elites presided over were far removed from the daily lives of average citizens, but the local notables exercised informal authority over their constituencies as arbiters and social leaders.[17]

It was Syria's union with Egypt that ruptured the relationship between political power and social standing in Syria, and this would lead to the economic decline of Syria's elite families. Land reforms in 1958 and extensive nationalisation campaigns in 1961 drastically reduced the economic position of the traditional elite.[18] The effects of these reforms extended beyond the economic sphere, dealing a crippling blow to those best suited to shield Syria from excessive predation. While Syria's elites would experience a brief respite after exiting the United Arab Republic, the Baʿath Party's 1963 coup would reinstitute many of Gamal Abdel Nasser's policies.[19]

The Baʿath Party's takeover of Syria solidified the decline of the old Sunni urban elites and landed aristocracy who had been central actors in Syrian politics.[20] Beyond reducing their economic power, restrictions on land ownership and private enterprise reshaped the already fractured hierarchical relationship they shared with their ancestral constituencies. Salah Jadid's 1966 coup widened the scope of these economic restrictions, leaving little room for private enterprise.[21] The uncompromising economic policies associated with Salah Jadid's regime provided suitable conditions for a pragmatic leader to coopt members of the

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[14] Jacob Nyrup & Stuart Bramwell, "Who Governs? a New Global Dataset on Members of Cabinets,"*American Political Science Review*, vol. 114, no. 4 (2020), pp. 1366-1374.

[15] Philip Shukry Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[16] Alasdair Drysdale, "The Syrian Political Elite, 1966–1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis,"*Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (January 1981), pp. 3-30.

[17] Philip Shukry Khoury, "Continuity and Change in Syrian Political Life: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,"*The American Historical Review* (December 1991), pp. 1374-1395.

[18] Syed Aziz–al Ahsan, "Economic Policy and Class Structure in Syria: 1958–1980,"*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3 (August 1984), pp. 301-323.

[19] Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[20] Drysdale.

[21] Ahsan.

merchant class. Hafez Al-Assad's 1970 "Corrective Movement"would bring about such an arrangement, allowing room for modest private economic enterprises.

While Hafez Al-Assad's support base has often been described in regional terms, whereby it was the rural coastal territories, Damascus and Daraa that operated as bastions of support for his rule, the traditional elites of Damascus were not necessarily among those coopted. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of a politically and economically pragmatic compromise that came in the form of the 1973 Constitution and looser restrictions on smaller economic enterprises appears to have contributed to the regime's persistence. The fall of the haute bourgeoisie opened up opportunities for the petit bourgeoisie. Rather than the Baʿath regime stifling the growth of small businesses, it expanded their growth in the 1980s.[22] While Hafez's reign was characteris ed by uncompromising political repression, it fostered an environment with relatively predictable rules for operating small scale economic enterprises that would not threaten the regime. Corruption was pervasive, but it was of a nature that allowed room for the petit bourgeoisie to manoeuvre. It was in the interest of the regime insiders and military officers who took bribes that these businesses persist. As such, this period was characterised to a large extent by a broad state/military bourgeoisie that benefited from constrained private markets.[23] Syria's relatively closed socialist economy did open up gradually in the 1990s due to the need to stimulate economic growth;[24] nevertheless, its economy remained heavily restricted and controlled. Moreover, Hafez Al-Assad's strengthening of the coercive capabilities of the regime without building an expansive coalition may have led to a decrease in the legitimacy of the state.[25]

Bashar Al-Assad's succession in 2000 brought about the rise of a new haute bourgeoisie that was tied to the regime and the decline of the petit bourgeoisie that had carved out a space for itself in Syria's restricted economy. In an ongoing research project related to dynastic succession, Ammar Shamaileh argues that it was in Bashar's strategic political interest to produce the rise of a new set of economic elites to balance against potential rivals from within the regime.[26] Hafez Al-Assad was a military leader who was at the centre of the Syrian political scene since 1963 and had gradually come to balance competing regime players in a manner that preserved his rule. In contrast, Bashar Al-Assad was a successor with strong ties to cosmopolitan kin and children of influential Syrians and only weak ties with the political and military apparatus. The liberalisation process allowed him to strengthen the portion of the regime most supportive of his rise to power. Such rapid pseudo-liberalisation, which resulted primarily from Assad's political weakness was not characterised by the enhanced protection of property rights, but by the opening up of industries to specific individuals.[27] This liberalisation process allowed the president to strengthen the position of close allies who could balance against the power of entrenched political and military elites. Syria's liberalisation process, which began with the lagging telecommunications sector, produced an economic order that was hierarchically structured with Rami Makhlouf, the president's cousin, and, eventually, Cham Holding at the top.

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[22] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "State and Civil Society in Syria,"*Middle East Journal*, vol. 47, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 243-257; Ahsan; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Political Economy of Economic Liberalization in Syria,"*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1995), pp. 305-320.

[23] Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Steven Heydemann (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York: Springer, 2004); Samer Abboud, "Economic Transformation and Diffusion of Authoritarian Power in Syria,"in: Larbi Sadiki, Heiko Wimmen & Layla Al–Zubaidi (eds.), *Democratic Transition in the Middle East: Unmaking Power* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 159-177.

[24] Fred H. Lawson, "Private Capital and the State in Contemporary Syria,"*Middle East Report*, no. 203 (1997), pp. 8-30.

[25] Saouli & Hinnebusch.

[26] Ammar Shamaileh, "Political Succession, Crony Capitalism and Economic Development in Syria,"The 116th American Political Science Association's Virtual Annual Meeting and Exhibition, "Democracy, Difference, and Destabilization", 9-13/9/2020.

[27] To be clear, there was not simply one policy adopted by the regime throughout the first decade of Bashar's rule. Abdullah Daradari's social market economy was not perceived favorably by many of the officials helping to craft Syria's economic policy, even after it was presented as the regime's stance in 2005, and at times certain individuals could guide decisions in other directions. Nevertheless, the period as a whole was characterized by pseudo-liberalization.

Makhlouf, the son of a successful businessman close to the authorities in his own right, was approved to open the first mobile telephone company. Later, a competitor, Areeba would arise and be bought out by the South African MTN group, but this company would also be partially owned by Makhlouf. In 2001, the government approved the formation of private banks, and in 2003 these banks began to operate in Syria.[28] As Syria's banks liberalised, Makhlouf would go on to own shares in many of these foreign banks that were allowed to open their doors in the country. Other economic elites also actively took on a disproportionate share of the interests in these new banks and other companies.

A stock exchange, The Damascus Securities Exchange was established in 2006 and opened in 2009. While it was relegated to a handful of companies primarily operating in the banking and insurance sector, it allowed for the efficient entry of foreign capital into Syrian markets. Although other companies existed and thrived in this environment, the implicit approval of Makhlouf and Cham Holdings was required in order for larger enterprises to be formed. What emerged was a liberalisation process that organised the private sphere hierarchically under the stewardship of Makhlouf, and this effectively reshaped the nature of the relationship between private sector actors and the regime. This economic order that disproportionately negatively affects many rural communities and smaller enterprises and benefited the economic elites drawn from his circle.[29] Ultimately, this produced a counterbalance to the entrenched political elites operating within the party and the government.

Accompanying Syria's liberalisation was the weakening of the political institutions and networks that operated within the state. Figure (1) presents the change in cabinets in Syria from 1964-2021. The width of each bar on the x axis represents the duration of the government's term while its height represents the proportion of surviving members of the previous cabinet and the black bars represent the change of prime minister for the newly formed government. The government formed in the year of Bashar Al-Assad's succession was associated with a lower survival rate of cabinet ministers than Hafez Al-Assad's 1970 coup. Although the latter presided over the government formation process, and many of those initially removed were charged with corruption, the government was formed within months of what was presumably his expected impending death.[30] While the cabinets that have run Syria's bureaucracies are not generally emphasis ed in discussions of power in Syria after 1963, the drastic changes to the cabinet highlight the extent to which the succession was associated with an attempt to weaken the network that had formed.[31]

Generally speaking, the tumultuous first five years of the regime are often considered to be a period where Bashar Al-Assad was attempting to consolidate power, and it was in 2005 that he was able to reign in or eliminate potential threats. Yet, even after 2005, the regime appears to be constantly in flux, never settling into an elite network that could persist. Under Hafez Al-Assad, the last three cabinets lasted 937, 1702, and 2814 days respectively. Under his son, no cabinet has lasted longer than 665 days. In the pre-war arrangement, economic elites were strengthened, the security apparatus was reshaped in order to revolve around individuals with familial ties, and the political institutions of the state were weakened. As such, the network of political elites had been weakened prior to the outset of the civil war.

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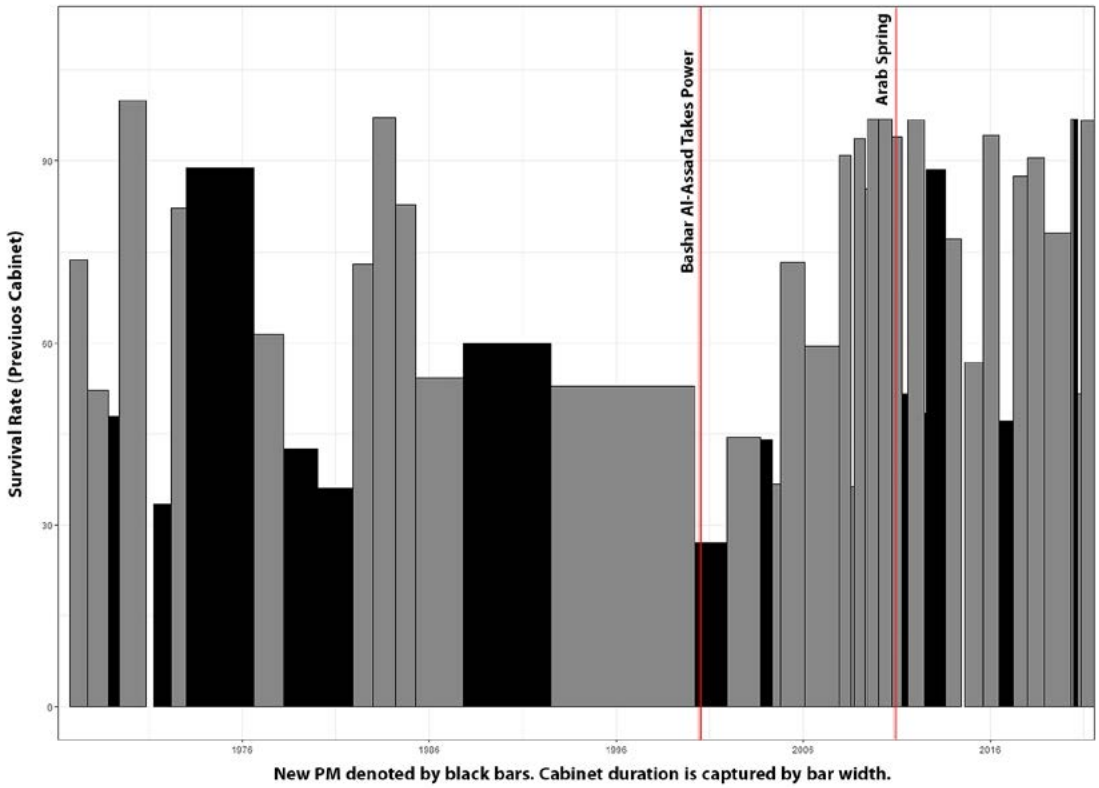
[28] Rashad Al-Kattan, "Mapping the Ailing (but Resilient) Syrian Banking Sector,"*Syria Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2015), pp. 1-36.

[29] Mohammed Jamal Barout, *al-ʿAqd al-Akhīr fī Tārīkh Sūryā: Jadaliyyat al-Jumūd wa-l-Iṣlāḥ* (Beirut/ Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

[30] While it is very likely that Mahmoud Al-Zoubi, the prime minister who was charged with corruption had engaged in corrupt practices in his dealings with Airbus, the charges against him and the other ministers appeared to be intended clear the way for Bashar Al-Assad's succession.

[31] It is, in our opinion, an area that has generally been neglected by scholars attempting to explore political change under Assad rule. As Figure (1) clearly demonstrates, significant changes in the patterns associated with survival rates indicate both that these cabinets are perceived as important by the leaders themselves and that leaders attempt to manipulate the composition of their cabinets to prevent threats.

Figure (1): The Survival Rate of Cabinet Ministers



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The Civil War and the Elite Landscape

While the uprising in Syria in 2011 and the subsequent civil war certainly challenged the regime, in hindsight, it also indirectly helped Assad by encouraging tepid supporters to defect or step away from public life. The whisper campaigns of former Syrian Vice President Abdelhalim Khaddam and his supporters that followed the succession made it easy to identify threats from the entrenched power players whom Bashar inherited and whose begrudging support helped him take power.[32] However, preference falsification by less prominent regime insiders meant that it was hard to observe others who could potentially turn on the regime.[33] Assad's inability to identify whom from among the regime's political elites could turn on him is exemplified by his appointment of Riyad Hijab as prime minister in 2012. When faced with the choice of drawing a hard line or broadening the regime, Assad chose the former, appointing a loyalist who was not widely known in Syria to head his new government. After less than two months in office, Hijab defected. While such incidents highlight the weakness of the regime at that point in time, they also point to the unintended benefits of the uprising. The pressure the regime faced provided the impetus for regime elites who were not committed to Assad to defect, withdraw from public life or quietly leave the country.

After a series of cabinet changes during 2011 and 2012, the regime's cabinets stabilised to some extent throughout the war. Nevertheless, changes to the composition of the cabinets continued to be made on a yearly basis under the governments of Imad Khamis and Wael Al-Halqi's. Parliamentary turnover (Figure (2)) was high in 2012 and 2016, but Syrian parliaments have been characteris ed by frequent turnover throughout

[32] Barout, pp. 44-47.

[33] Timur Kuran, "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,"W*orld Politics*, vol. 44, no. 1 (October 1991), pp. 7-48; Ammar Shamaileh, "Never Out of Now: Preference Falsification, Social Capital and the Arab Spring,"*International Interactions*, vol. 45, no. 6 (2019), pp. 949-975.

Bashar Al-Assad's reign. Despite the vast limitations placed on Parliament that render it relatively impotent, it is an important tool that is used by the regime to legitimise certain actors and raise their social profile.

When the regime was threatened by popular protests during the Arab Spring, protesters did not merely target the repressive political regime, but also the corrupt economic order.[34] In 2011 and 2012, as some members of Syria's "old guard"began to defect or simply withhold support for the regime and the military's ranks were shrinking, Syria's new haute bourgeoisie, along with a cadre of newly prominent economic actors, would be relied upon for both economic and coercive support. Rami Makhlouf and Mohammed Hamsho would utilise their diverse economic portfolios to create diversified coercive portfolios comprised of various pro-regime militias. While Mohammed Hamsho's actions were largely linked to Assad's brother Maher Al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf operated with greater autonomy in shaping his contribution to the pro-regime forces. Through his relationship with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and vast economic empire, Rami Makhlouf was able to construct a potential threat to Assad by unifying his economic empire with a political apparatus, a social service apparatus in Al-Bustan Association and a relatively large fighting force. This may have provided Makhlouf with leverage in the short-term, but it is this leverage that may have ultimately led to his demise.

In addition to the economic actors who came to dominate Syria prior to the Arab Spring, new economic forces emerged, using the war as an opportunity to utilise their wealth to enter the ranks of the regime's elite.[35] Many of these individuals were drawn from the import-export industry, although would-be elites were drawn from various backgrounds. The opening up of such opportunities to a diverse set of individuals diluted the power of the haute bourgeoisie that had developed in the decade that preceded the war.[36] Moreover, for many individuals, the war itself opened up opportunities to gain economic power by assisting with the regime's coercive efforts, among them some prosperous tribal leaders whom the regime had managed to co-opt.[37] Syria's military, which was estimated to total 403,000 soldiers in 2010 collapsed rapidly in the face of the uprising, with the total infantry estimated at 178,000 in 2011.[38] According to other estimates, Syria's army nominally had approximately 220,000 troops in 2011, yet only approximately 65,000 could be deployed.[39] While defections reduced the number of fighting men, the regime's greater concern was over the loyalty of those who remained, therefore it remained reluctant to send many of them to combat.

The weakness of the regime's forces and inability to enlist new soldiers led to a reliance on militias led by local elites.[40] Many were organised under the umbrella of the National Defence Forces (NDF), and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah, or the Russian army, it remained decentralised throughout much of the war and local businessmen played an important role in funding them.[41] It was these militias, some of which operated more like mafias and were not particularly loyal to the regime, that effectively turned the tide of the war in the regime's favour, and this effort was led and funded by old and new economic elites.[42] Whether their rise began in the coercive sphere during the war or export-import

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[34] Unsurprisingly, this brought back to the political stage the names of the old aristocratic families as mobilizers of political protest.

[35] Siham Alatassi, "The Role of the Syrian Business Elite in the Syrian Conflict: A Class Narrative,"*British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (May 2021), pp. 1-13.

[36] Although reports of the decline of Rami Makhlouf during the war appear to have been exaggerated, in relative terms, his power diminished throughout the war. Nevertheless, up until the regime's actions against his interests, he remained powerful throughout the war.

[37] Mouldi Lahmar, *al-Qabīla fī al-Thawra al-Sūriyya: al-Mafhūm wa-Qīmatuh* (Tunis: Manshurat Tabr al-Zaman, 2018), p. 36.

[38] The World Bank, "Armed Forces Personnel, Total – Syrian Arab Republic,"accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3oOCesZ

[39] Institute for the Study of War, Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War* (Washington, DC: 2013), p. 27, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3LuYn9v

[40] There is significant heterogeneity in how individuals were recruited into such militias. Some volunteered, some transitioned from working leaders and financiers of militias to fighting in the militias, others were arrested by the government and given the option to be released if they agreed to fight in a militia. The exploration of such divergent paths into the militias is important to note, but a deeper exploration of this is beyond the scope of this article.

[41] Reinoud Leenders & Antonio Giustozzi, "Outsourcing State Violence: The National Defence Force, 'Stateness' and Regime Resilience in the Syrian War,"*Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 24, no. 2 (October 2019), pp. 157-180.

[42] Ibid., pp. 166.

businesses or other industries prior to the war, many of Syria's local regime-aligned economic elites participated directly or indirectly in the war effort through specific militias.[43]

It did not take long for Assad and his advisors to recognise the long-term threat posed by the local militias forming to fight and maintain control of neighbourhoods ostensibly in defence of the regime. Indeed, this was the primary motivation for forming the NDF and organising these militias under their banner. Some of these linkages were formalised, but these ties often developed and grew informally through repeated interactions.[44] Over time, the army curtailed the autonomy of these militias by involving themselves more heavily in their operations and overseeing their activities.[45] Nevertheless, the decentralisation of the regime's control over the coercive apparatus and the involvement of economic elites in funding the militias produced an arrangement whereby some authority at the local level was delegated to the local elites. This served to weaken Assad's position within the regime, yet it did so in a manner that allowed him to maintain a fractured network of economic elites that was manageable.

It is during the war that Assad found himself in what is described above as the state of precarious stability with regards to his position within the regime. Within the political apparatus, there remained no viable challengers to Assad, most of whom were eliminated prior to the war. Both the Baʿath Party and networks that could pose a threat to his rule had been weakened. Elites within the security apparatus of the regime had been chosen on the basis of anticipated loyalty and were further neutralised by the diversification of coercive power among regime forces. Moreover, while economic elites had gained in strength during this time, they lacked the cohesion and autonomous networks to support a potential challenger to the regime. Nevertheless, while the regime's economic elites were fractured, Assad's weakness in absolute terms meant that there was the potential that networks that could challenge Assad from within the regime could be formed. Thus, the precarity of the situation: While regime elite networks were too weak to potentially challenge Assad, the evolution of these networks could produce a potential challenger due, in turn, to Assad's weakness.

In such an environment, neither power-sharing arrangements nor stable networks of loyal elites should form. In their stead, the regime should be incentivised to produce constant changes in both whom is counted among the elites and their relative strength. As such, the position of the leader should be stable, while the positions of those within the regime should be constantly in flux. It was at the height of the war that this dynamic began to unfold in a restrained yet deliberate manner. A seemingly constant stream of names would be claimed to have taken Rami Makhlouf's place at the head of Syria's economic landscape, yet no individual would remain in such a position for long. This phenomenon intensified as the regime made gains and was able to increase its control over the militias with the assistance of Iran and Russia. Eventually, when the regime turned its sights to solidifying Assad's position in 2019 and 2020, stronger measures were taken to weaken the position of certain powerful elites.

The Consolidation of Power and the Political Elite Landscape

As the regime's position has improved in relation to the opposition, it has focused on protecting Assad's position within the regime. In such a context, strengthening the political apparatus is potentially a double-edged sword. By creating a stable network of political actors to balance against those not associated with the regime

[43] Ibid., pp. 171-172.

[44] Most notably, Maher Al-Assad's fourth division developed strong ties with a diverse set of economic elites, many of whom were antagonistic toward one another. Ayman Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict,"Middle East Directions– Wartime and Post–Conflict in Syria, European University Institute (January 2020), accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sEzQGn

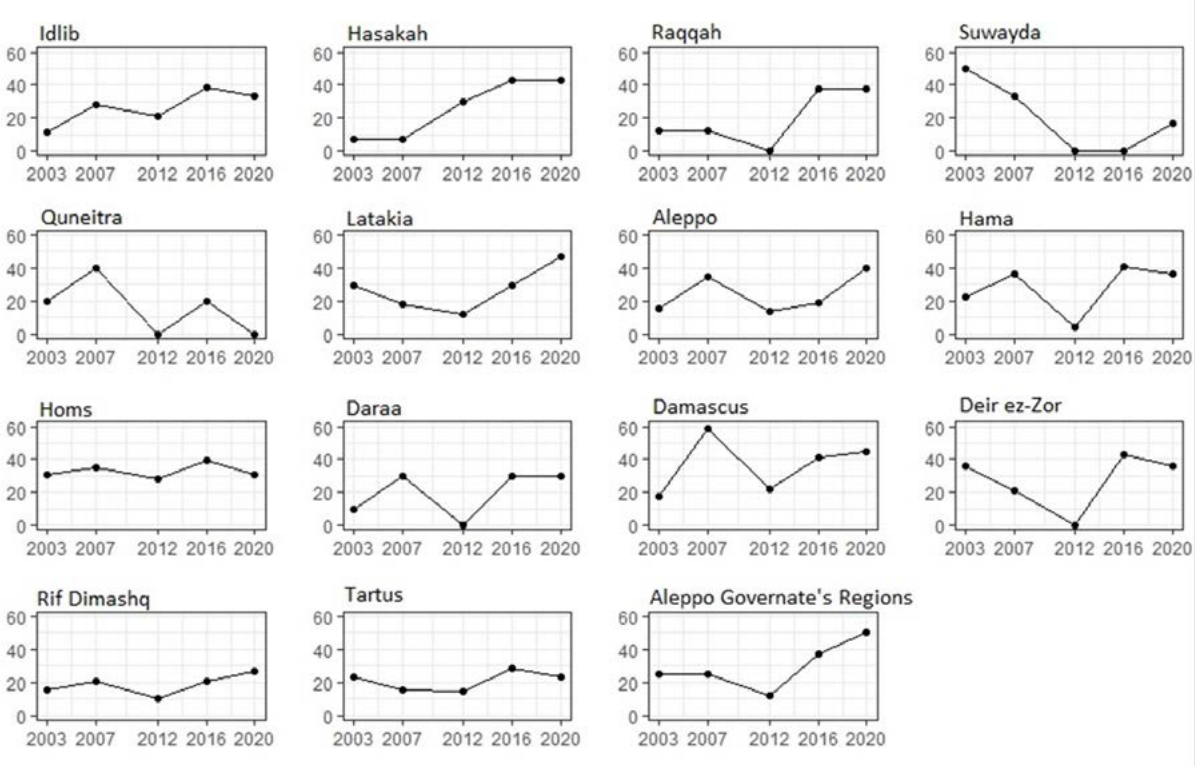
[45] It is important to note that not all pro-regime militias operated under the banner of the NDF, but that an extensive discussion of these militias is beyond the scope of this article.

in the private sphere, Assad may put himself in a position where foreign and domestic actors perceive him as replaceable. Thus far, the evidence of Assad strengthening the state's institutions and the party are mixed.

As Figure (1) demonstrates, rule under Bashar Al-Assad has persistently been characterised by changes in the cabinet. Nevertheless, in 2020, five different cabinets and two prime ministers served, exceeding other years. While each individual change in the composition of the government was usually minor, of the 32 positions in the final government formed in 2020, only 13 were held by the same individual at the beginning of the year.[46] Nevertheless, as has been noted, frequent minor changes in the government have been a hallmark of Bashar Al-Assad's reign. Moreover, there are explanations other than that offered in this article that are also consistent with the numerous changes to the government in 2020. The economic strain experienced by the Assad regime during this period likely contributed to the high rate of government turnover. However, the pattern exhibited throughout Bashar Al-Assad's reign is consistent with the argument that the regime had weakened the political apparatus in order to avoid threats from within the regime arising and was unable to subsequently settle into a stable elite network.

While Syria's parliament currently lacks clout and institutionalised authority, it has served as a tool by the regime to legitimise potential social and economic elites. Moreover, in an atmosphere where international pressure could push Assad to engage in reforms, the parliament could play a role in shaping the next Syrian constitution. Turnover in Syria's parliament in 2020 was not substantially different than in other years during Bashar Al-Assad's tenure. Only approximately 37% of the 2020 parliament was made up of incumbents, which is similar to and slightly exceeds incumbency rates prior to the civil war and is significantly higher than the incumbency rates in 2012 and 2016. What is notable, however, is that the incumbency rate has been persistently low under Bashar Al-Assad.

Figure (2): Percentage of Parliamentarians who were Incumbents by District (2003-2020)



Source: Prepared by the authors.

[46] Although it should be noted that the Minister of Foreign Affairs passed away during the year, and that the second prime minister was drawn from the government.

Perhaps more important than the degree of turnover in Parliament is who precisely was excluded. Rather than a large-scale overhaul of parliament, the 2020 elections appeared to be characterised by the targeted removal of certain powerful individuals from office. Primary elections, which were held for the first time, may be interpreted as strengthening the position of the party, yet it was fraught with accusations of corruption from within the party. As has been noted by others, it appeared to play a greater role as an information gathering mechanism for Assad, and some of the decisions taken by the regime may be interpreted as having intentionally disqualified individuals who were particularly popular and/or powerful.[47] Whether through a rigged non-binding primary election or through pressure by the regime, there were significant changes to the people's council. Mohammed Hamsho and Fares Shehabi, longstanding and rising powers, were denied seats in parliament in 2020. Mohammed Hamsho's decision to refrain from running for both parliament and the Damascus Chamber of Commerce shocked many, but it was just one of numerous instances of powerful elites being pressured to scale back their involvement in politics and business.

Lest these actions be viewed as a rebuke of the business community as a whole, it should be noted that the number of businessmen in parliament rose from 13 to 44 according to the coding scheme utilised by Ziad Awad and Agnes Fever.[48] Many of these first-term businessmen were heavily involved in the financing of pro-regime militias but lacked the connections in the business community possessed by Hamsho and Shehabi. Moreover, while the removal of Hamsho may be interpreted as an action against taken against Maher Al-Assad aligned elites in an effort to tilt the balance away from his network of business associates and toward those favoured by Asma Al-Assad, many who remained in parliament or were elected for the first time had forged close ties with Maher Al-Assad's Fourth Armored Division, including the notorious Hussam Qaterji.

Other actions taken by the regime do point to efforts at centralising authority in the state. For example, in 2017, Assad dissolved the General Women's Union, transferring its duties to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.[49] While the General Women's Union was not an autonomous organisation, it provided for a modicum of room for women to engage in social initiatives and debate issues relevant to women's issues in Syria. Yet, although the legal landscape extended the power of the state during this period of time, little action was taken to strengthen state institutions.

The Consolidation of Power and the Economic Elite Landscape

In late April of 2020, stunned Syrians watched, shared and commented on a video of a melancholy Rami Makhlouf airing grievances and beseeching the regime to halt its encroachment into his economic empire.[50] This was the first in a series of increasingly aggressive videos uploaded by the president's cousin and former Syrian economic hegemon.[51] But for the callous disregard for Syrian lives and livelihoods demonstrated by

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[47] Ammar Yassir Hammou, "bi-dharīʿat 'al-istiʾnās al-ḥizbī': al-niẓām yakshif awzān al-tayyārāt dākhil 'al-baʿth' al-ḥākim wa-yanqalib ʿalayhā,"*Syria Direct*, 22/7/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sEAvHR

However, it should also be noted that, setting aside accusations of corruption, the party did generally nominate the individuals who were selected in the primary elections. Ziad Awad & Agnès Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020: The Regime's Social Base Contracts,"Syria Transition Challenges Project, Geneva Centre for Security Policy and European University Institute – Middle East Directions Programme, Research Project Report No. 2 (October 2020), accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3uKyc8Z

[48] Ziad Awad & Agnès Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016–2020),"European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (April 2020), accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/33jStqB; Awad & Favier, "Syrian People's Council Elections 2020."

[49] Syrian Arab Republic, People's Assembly of Syria, "Legislative Decree No. 16 of 2017 and the dissolve of General Women's Union,"23/4/2017, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3oP7RCG

[50] "Rami Makhlouf yatawajjah bi vīdyū lil-Assad: yaḥiq lanā muqāḍāt al-dawla wa-sáaḍaʿ kul al-wathāʾiq,"*RT-Facebook* (Arabic), 1/5/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3DMyTRm

[51] "Sūryā.. Rami Makhlouf fī vīdyū jadīd,"*Youtube*, 17/5/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3GOpYPl

Makhlouf, these videos may have evoked sympathy from many rather than schadenfreude from most. The economic strain of the war, a global pandemic, economic turmoil, and efforts by the regime to consolidate power by eliminating internal threats to stability left a large swath of the state aggrieved. Yet, rather than rally around Makhlouf, Syrians largely ridiculed what was perceived as a pathetic attempt to maintain a corrupt economic empire. Whether the monologues were intended to mobilise the masses or speak directly to members of the regime, the videos and the aftermath of the videos demonstrate the drastic overestimation and rapid decline of Rami Makhlouf's political capital in Syria.[52]

Similar to other periods of flux in Syria, political considerations have led to a reorganisation of economic power. While much attention has been paid to the fall of Rami Makhlouf, more tempered actions have been taken against other economic elites in Syria. The scaling back of Hamsho and Shehabi's ambitions was accompanied by extensive changes in the Damascus and Aleppo Chambers of Commerce. Of the 18 businesspeople elected or appointed to the board of directors of their governorate's chamber, 15 in Damascus and 12 in Aleppo were not on the previous board. Such high rates of turnover were also found in most governorates with large cities.[53] While the 2014 elections also saw high turnover, much of that turnover was due to board members fleeing the war, and elections prior to the war did not lead to drastic changes. The more recent changes are directly attributable to the regime.

If Bashar Al-Assad's reign persists, the decisions being made in an effort to consolidate power may eventually fundamentally shape the structure of Syria's economic and political order. Assad is not likely to subordinate his own interest in the preservation of his rule to the reconstruction of Syria.[54] As the civil war has receded, the regime's efforts to consolidate power have placed it at odds with many of the elites who funded and aided the war effort. The most damaging blows have been dealt to those who possessed the greatest capacity to threaten Assad's rule.

Elite resistance to regime predation has thus far been limited and ineffective. Rami Makhlouf did attempt to resist actions taken against his economic interests, but his attempts failed as his network of affiliates did not come to his aid. Mohammed Hamsho's efforts to maintain both his political clout and buy up property throughout Damascus and elsewhere have been partially rebuffed, yet despite some reported grumbling, he has not overtly and transparently attacked the regime. Hamsho and Fares Shehabi, leaders in their respective business communities, have also voiced concerns related to the rise of others, particularly warlords such as the Qaterjis, but none that have directly challenged or publicly appealed to the top of the regime.[55] Despite their tepid resistance, they have also been marginalised.[56] Wealthy war profiteers drawn from the import-export business, such as Samer Foz, have attempted to diversify their holdings outside of Syria after being made to tone down their activities, yet sanctions and notoriety have made investment abroad increasingly difficult.[57] Nevertheless, individuals like Foz who have temporarily complied with the

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[52] See: Joseph Daher, "The Syrian Presidential Palace Strengthens its Concentration of Power: The Rift Makhlouf–Assad,"Middle East Directions– Wartime and Post–Conflict in Syria, European University Institute (May 2020), accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sDbsVC

[53] Joseph Daher, "The Syrian Chambers of commerce in 2020: The Rise of a New Business Elite,"Middle East Directions– Wartime and Post–Conflict in Syria, European University Institute (November 2020), accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3gHJyCv

[54] Steven Heydemann, "Reconstructing Authoritarianism: The Politics and Political Economy of Post–Conflict Reconstruction in Syria,"*POMEPS Studies*, POMEPS, 10/9/2018, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3JoTlJR; Daher, "The Syrian Presidential Palace."

[55] Liz Sly & Asser Khattab, "Syria's Elections Have Always Been Fixed. This Time, Even Candidates Are Complaining,"*Washington Post*, 22/7/2022, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://wapo.st/3gKFaT8. Both Hamsho and Shehabi were surprisingly excluded from a second term in parliament during the 2020 elections.

[56] Mansour Hussein, "umarāʾ al-ḥarb yaksibūn maʿrakat ghuraf al-tijāra.. al-Assad yaqsī al-ḥaras al-qadīm,"*Almudun*, 8/10/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3gHG1Uy

[57] Ali al-Khaldi, "muʾāmarat 'ghasl al-amwāl' badåat min al-ṣīn,"*Alqabas*, 29/7/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/33kwyzr; Al-Monitor Staff, "US Sanctions Syria's Central Bank Chief, Intel Head,"*Al-Monitor*, 30/9/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sE0O10. It should also be noted that the sanctions have likely contributed to the turnover in economic elites, as was noted by Samer Abboud during the "Frozen Conflicts"workshop.

downsizing of their economic ambitions have seen opportunities arise again in the future. For example, Foz recently built Syria's largest sugar refinery;[58] this is just the most recent of his many projects in Syria. Moreover, it should be noted that fierce competition between these economic actors has thus far most often succeeded in preventing collective action to stop the targeted actions of the regime. Without the incentives to collectively act, and many of their coercive capacities already diminished, these elites will be forced to accept further predation by the regime.[59]

Syria's future economic landscape is unlikely to return to its pre-war order and we will most likely not see the rise of a hegemonic economic actor in Syria in the near future. The regime has diversified its cadre of political and economic beneficiaries, creating a more competitive elite landscape that has incorporated many of those who organised and funded pro-regime militias throughout Syria. The list of these elites includes a mixture of new and old names. To the consternation of many, the children of ex-generals will likely remain important player; as will the those whose prominence came during pre-war order, such as Hamsho, Shehabi, and Ihab Makhlouf.[60] They will be joined by new elites like Foz, the Qatarji brothers, Yasar Ibrahim, and Wassim Qattan, many of whom are drawn from outside of the pre-war order's social spheres of influence. New names will emerge, and they will likely be tied directly to some degree to the upper echelons of the regime.

While a new group of quasi-monopolists may emerge to exercise huge influence over a reconstituted haute bourgeoisie,[61] the weakness of the state's institutions and central coercive apparatus make that a sub-optimal solution for Assad. At the moment, the stability of his leadership appears to rely on the instability of the elite landscape. Moreover, the passage of time and defections during the civil war have produced a political apparatus that is more closely linked to Bashar Al-Assad than the regime he inherited. He may find that it is in his interest to strengthen the same institutions that he weakened when they were occupied by tepid supporters, but the development of such a network will take time. New rising economic powers such as Asma Al-Assad's cousin, Muhannad Al-Dabbagh, and some members of the Ibrahim family have begun to take on a larger role in the economic sphere, but they will likely never approach the economic strength of the oligarchs of the 2000s.[62] The unpopularity of the "smart cards"being distributed in regime-controlled areas to ration fuel and bread have led to a significant popular backlash against elites aligned with Asma Al-Assad, who continue to play an important role in the Syrian economy. Other rising powers, such as the Qatarji brothers, are unlikely to further strengthen their position due to the significant antipathy many within the regime have for them. Furthermore, the current set of competing elites are closely linked to various members of the regime and Assad's foreign benefactors, producing an environment whereby any increase in economic power afforded to a particular individual or group strengthens one element of the regime at the expense of another.

While there has been no transition at the top of the regime, the emerging economic landscape has shifted away from domination by quasi-monopolists to a diversified set of elites linked to regime members,

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[58] "maṣnaʿ al-sukkar al-jadīd li-Samer Foz wa-shurakāʾ yaqlaʿ al-shahr al-qādim min ḥasyāʾ biṭāqat milyūn ṭin sanawiyyan,"*Industry News*, 8/3/2021, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3uPdC7w;

Although Foz has built the largest sugar refinery in Syria, it should be noted that on 27 July 2021, the government appears to have awarded a contract to refine sugar to other companies, and there is speculation one of the company awarded the contract is a front for the Qaterji brothers: "State Plants go to Influential Investors,"*The Syria Report*, 11/8/2021, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3HQyXkw

[59] Qaterji may be a notable exception, as he has largely maintained both a significant coercive capacity and gained a seat in parliament, yet the Qaterji brothers and other warlords have also served as a threat to some urban elites.

[60] The list of individuals and families who may be considered among the elites is fairly long. The names highlighted above have been particularly notable, but others could also be incorporated.

[61] Joseph Daher, "The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction,"Carnegie Middle East Center, 4/9/2019, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/34Ylrwo

[62] He has been playing a progressively larger role in Syria's economic arena, and, perhaps aside from possibly Ihab Makhlouf, has benefited most from the fall of Rami Makhlouf. Amin al-Assi, "al-Assad fī al-Qirdāḥa: taqsīm Al Makhlouf,"*al-Arabi all-Jadid*, 25/8/2020, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sIoUHK

as well as foreign sponsors, Iran and Russia. Thus, rather than balancing economic hegemons against the political and coercive apparatuses of the state, Assad appears to be balancing the power of competing regime members and foreign forces against one another through the manipulation of the economic elite landscape. Such manipulation of the elite landscape has also occurred in political spheres, where political office has been redistributed to legitimise some and weaken others.

It is also possible that there will be greater direct state involvement in previously privatised industries. This may occur through the nationalisation of entities or industries but may also occur through public-private partnerships or the ad hoc exercise of authority rooted in judicial action. Although the numerous recent decrees and laws related to economic activity and property rights have signalled that crony capitalism will remain pervasive, it places the state at the centre of such economic activity.[63] While this would likely reduce the performance of such entities,[64] it would prevent the rise of potentially destabilising economic forces. Thus, the structure of state-elite relations in a post-war Assad-ruled Syria will likely be characteris ed to a greater extent by networks of partnerships between political and business elites similar to those seen under Hafez Al-Assad's Syria rather than Bashar's pre-war order. Yet, in the short term, this landscape will not provide for the regularity and consistency that allowed small enterprises to persist throughout Hafez's reign in the 1980s and 1990s. As such, this strategy may help Assad prevent the rise of powerful internal rivals, but it will do little to allay the concerns of Syrians or reverse Syria's economic decline.

Conclusion

As this article is written, conflict in Aleppo between the government and leaders in Aleppo's business community has heated up. Government predation in the most literal sense of the term, and restrictions on the business community that have been perceived as overly burdensome, have led to unprecedent strikes, provoking a fierce reaction from the regime.[65] In many ways, this is a business community that was designed by the regime and its associates in the aftermath of its victory over the opposition. Nevertheless, when the business community collectively acted in its interests, the response of the regime was swift and severe. The paper contends that unless there is a dramatic change in the organisation of the regime, or the Assad is removed from power, such flare-ups will continue to occur.

This article argued that the conceptualisation of the consolidation of power used by scholars could be refined to extend beyond the notion of shared power and consolidated power. Leaders who are weak due to outside threats or network structures that leave them vulnerable may find themselves in a situation where they are significantly stronger than elites, but opportunities for threats to arise are prevalent. In such situations, there are strong incentives for leaders to destabilise the regime's elite landscape to prevent such networks from forming.

In Syria, Hafez Al-Assad had been able to consolidate his power in the late 1980s through the formation of a stable network of elites that were clearly subordinate to him and operating in a system with sophisticated coup-proofing mechanisms posing no threat to his rule. The transition to Bashar Al-Assad led to the restructuring of the elite landscape, shifting the locus of power away from political and bureaucratic

[63] Such as the infamous Law no. 10 of 2018. See: Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Prime Ministry, "Law no. 10 of 2018 which permits the creation of one or more organizational areas within the general organizational scheme of the administrative units by a decree based on the proposal of the Minister of Local Administration and Environment and the amendment of some articles of Legislative Decree No. 66 of 2012,"2/4/2018, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3sFeitf

[64] Mohammed Omran, "Privatization, State Ownership, and Bank Performance in Egypt,"*World Development*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2007), pp. 714-733.

[65] "Government Pressures Aleppo's Business Community as Rare Tensions Trigger Strikes, Media Reports,"*The Syria Report*, 15/9/2021, accessed on 14/2/2022, at: https://bit.ly/3gIaf9Y

institutions toward a small set of private actors who helped shape and organise private sector activity. During this time, political actors and institutions were weakened through the disruption of their networks, yet rather than purge these networks, they remained weak due to constant turnover. During the civil war, the pressing needs of the regime led to the decentralisation of coercive and economic power in Syria. Given Assad's weakness, it has been in, and will continue to be in, his interest to weaken both the political networks that could support a transition to a new leader and the economic networks that could support a potential successor.

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