



13-01-2016

Syria and Russia: An Unbreakable Bond?

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It is a popular notion — whether in the media, or some academic circles — that democracy is the most prevalent political system in our world today. Proponents of such view offer as evidence the several consecutive “democratization waves” (Huntington 1991, 16—26) that have taken place in the 20th century. Yet the reality of our world today has

rather been shaped by the proliferation of authoritarian regimes, with “33 regimes [which] were competitive authoritarian in 1995—a figure that exceeded the number of full democracies in the developing and post-communist world” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3). The “competitive” (ibid.) or “hybrid” type of authoritarian regimes (Sakwa 2011, xiv) in which democratic elements combine with authoritarianism such as what we see in Russia under Putin, as well as traditional authoritarian systems, such as the Assad regime in Syria, are of particular interest.

Both these systems have embarked on processes of authoritarian ‘upgrade,’ with varying degrees of success—processes that include the “selective processes of economic liberalization [which] reinforce the social base of authoritarian regimes, and mitigate pressures for comprehensive economic and social reforms” (Heydemann 2007, 14). Both systems claim to include a variety of institutions and political processes, yet both are characterized by the centrality of the President. Both countries share a history of close relations, stretching back from the Soviet era to present day, and identify as allies.

Given the current backdrop of the ongoing Syrian conflict, and the links between the Russian and Syrian positions therein, it becomes salient to ask: How similar are both political systems? Does the authoritarian nature of the Russian and Syrian political systems explain their alliance? And how will the authoritarian upgrade process in both Russia and Syria affect policy choices in both countries, in the context of the Syrian Revolution and beyond? This essay will examine the political systems in Russia and Syria, the history of their leadership styles, and economic fortunes; then contrast these systems against the backdrop

of the current conflict in Syria, in which both sides are aligned. The aim will be to demonstrate that, despite initial similarities, the differences between both systems combined with the high degree of pragmatism both employ in their policy choices, will mean divergent policy outlooks and outputs. Such divergent outputs will affect the future outcome for the Syrian conflict and, thus, the very fate of the Syrian regime; as well as Russia's general strategic posture, beyond.

Russia

Russia is a country with a vast territory, and a highly diversified populace in terms of ethnicities and religions, as well as economic fortunes and development levels. To rule such a diverse and vast territory, Russian political elites early on opted for a strong centralized state, which has since become a vaunted Russian tradition. Strong men with strong personalities played central roles in such a system—from Peter the Great, to Stalin. While brutally repressive regimes exhibited varying degrees of cruelty, an authoritarian tradition has come to hold strong resonance for most Russians. The traditional alliance of the all-powerful Orthodox Church with the state ensures a politically-quietist population. Moreover, the multinational and multiethnic composition of the population has resulted in a weak development of feelings of nationalism. Nationalism in Russia, instead, has traditionally “been articulated in ways that conformed to the needs of strong state institutions” (Alprete Jr. 2013, 13).

Gorbachev and the final Yeltsin years notwithstanding, this state of affairs seems to have persisted during the Putin era. The characteristic “dual state” which has existed in

Russia since 1906 (Sakwa 2010, x), in which formally democratic institutions coexist with extra-democratic realities is alive and well. As part of this “dual state,” the role of the tsar surpassed that of a mere head of state to being an earthly extension of divine will. As such the tsar, assumes an “extra-constitutional mandate” to govern in what he alone defines as the best interests of the country. The populace—despite being allowed to vote and participate in a democratic process—is not to be trusted to determine what is best for themselves. This becomes the prerogative of the tsar and his government, who will resort to any measures necessary, even if this means flouting the constitution. The population is, thus “infantilized and the legal-constitutional order suborned” (Sakwa 2011, xii—xiii). To date, there appears to remain an absence of any clear consensus among Russians on what would constitute the best system of government, or about the “principles by which society and the economy should be run... many Russians—although not all—prefer a Russian brand of populist socialism largely unchanged from Soviet times” (Gustafson 2012, 482). In other words, a long tradition of strong centralized rule, an inflated executive personified by a central tsar-like figure, and a quietist population have all seemingly conspired to define the contours of modern Russian politics.

In such a system, politics inevitably is reduced to the dynamics of the “leader-elite” nexus – a dynamic in which both sides attempt to maintain a tenuous balance allowing varying degrees of leverage over one another. This dynamic which “forms the core of authoritarian politics” (Frantz and Ezrow 2011, 107), translates into a game of shadows, in which leverage is exerted in the corridors of power, far from the public eye. It also has “a public form played out using

the formal political institutions and processes” and whose outcomes have eventually “shaped the nature of the system.” The Russian leader and elites, mistrustful of the electorate and fearing their “untrammelled exercise of electoral democracy,” have found ways of “constraining the electoral process to ensure its [the system’s] own survival” (Sakwa 2011, x—xi). This centralization of power, as well as the internal leader-elite balance which seems to successfully “prevent any one actor from acting independently,” appears to have tacit consensus inside the Kremlin as well as the host of influential interests behind it (Gustafson 2012, 478).

The Russian political system today, despite the veneer of democratic institutions and constitutionality is, therefore, “probably best classified as a case of competitive authoritarianism” (Alprete Jr. 2013, 11). A competitive authoritarian system is one in which democratic institutions ostensibly exist, yet in which the democratic process is abused by the incumbent executive, to stifle a challenge to his authority. This is manifested in a “playing field [that] is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5). Putin and his ‘presidential’ political party Yedinaya Rossiya [United Russia] reign supreme over political life in Russia today. And while the political system is civilian and not overtly dominated by the military, the military remains a bedrock of the leader-elite alliance. Also, while wide-scale violent political repression is largely absent inside Russia proper, Putin has, in the recent enough past, resorted to violence—violence that appears to have filtered its way back into the domestic political scene. The Chechnya War signaled the emergence of a new class of siloviki [people of power, such as the State Security FSB officers]. These

siloviki “often brought this cruelty, this terrible indifference to people’s suffering, back to the regions from which they came” (Pirani 2010, 111—112).

Putin’s carefully-choreographed inauguration ceremony in 2012 had all the trappings of a modern tsar entering the Kremlin— a calculated statement, as evidenced by later developments. Having witnessed the dithering of the Yeltsin presidency firsthand, he resolved to restore the prestige of the presidential office and end the vacuum at the center of power, restoring “professionalism to decision-making” (Bobo 2003, 97), and reordering the state’s priorities. Putin, for whom “[o]rder’ (poryadok) and ‘strength’ (sila) are more important than sensitivity towards rights and freedoms, individual or collective” (ibid., 100) made his first order of priority the restoration of the state’s “security and law enforcement capabilities” (Alprete Jr. 2013, 17). An ardent nationalist, he firmly believed in Russia’s “*derzhavnost* (‘great power-ness’)” (Bobo 2003, 13)—an enduring and widespread concept among Russians of all stripes. To him, this power and stature is linked to “the strength of the administrative capacity of the Russian state” (Alprete Jr. 2013, 17). He therefore positioned the creation of a “‘managed” or “sovereign” democracy,” as being “embedded in the broadly popular idea of restoring Russia’s international position” (ibid., 12).

The second pillar of his authoritarian upgrade project was to revamp the floundering economy. Following the Yeltsin years’ ‘gangster economy’, Putin set about reinserting the state as the key player in economic affairs. This he did by clamping down on the excesses of the oligarchs, who were co-opted by the state, or shunted into exile (Boris Berezhevsky) or sent to prison (Mikhail Khodorkovsky). It

was part of his efforts to project an image of a strong state, and proved to be a highly popular move given the population's resentment of the oligarchs' excesses. The Russian state also extended its ownership of strategic economic interests and reasserted its role as final arbiter in economic planning goals. Far from a return to the days of Soviet central planning, this may be termed as a "Kremlin Inc." (Sakwa 2011, 151) in which strategic sectors of the economy, such as the oil or arms industries were reorganized under state-owned corporations, whose heads were appointed directly by the Kremlin. Despite initial difficulties, Russia witnessed an impressive economic recovery. Rising oil prices—from \$28 per barrel in 2000 to \$135 in 2008 (Rose et al. 2011)—helped to transform the economy. With GDP growing "by about 70 per cent," the misfortune of the late-Soviet era, and the Yeltsin years, was reversed. Thus, Russia went from owing the 'Paris Club' of creditors circa \$47 billion at the start of Putin's presidency, to "every cent ha[ving] been repaid" by 2006. In addition, between 2000 and 2007, Russia's foreign currency and gold reserves grew "17-fold to \$478 billion, then the third largest such pile of cash behind China's and Japan's" (Pirani 2010, 47).

The impressive nature of this recovery notwithstanding, Russia's economy was, and still is, subdued by inherent and substantial weaknesses. It remains largely dependent on oil, which is "the essential engine of the economy" (Gustafson 2012, 450). This means that Russia's economic fortunes are hostage to the vagaries of global energy markets. For example, the sharp drop in average annual oil prices in 2008 and 2009 from \$95 per barrel to \$60 per barrel "cost Russia 9 to 16 percentage points of annual GDP growth" (ibid., 484). The highly centralized and

personalized power structure has also resulted in widespread nepotism and cronyism. According to independent estimates, official corruption had by 2005 “ballooned into a ‘market’ estimated by Indem [an independent think-tank] to be worth \$315 billion” (Pirani 2010, 120). This corruption was most spectacularly manifest in the upper tier of the elite, as “[f]riends and colleagues of the Putin team began to flourish in private business” (ibid., 92). Additionally, despite latent efforts by the state to improve regional economic growth, the distribution of national wealth remains extremely and woefully uneven. In a 2007 study, the United Nations Development Program [UNDP] concluded that “‘divisions between regions are increasing’ and are ‘most marked’ in areas in which Russia lags behind developed countries—per capita gross regional product (GRP) and life expectancy” (ibid., 142).

Syria

“As Syrian analyst Wael Sawah candidly remarks: “In the Bible, God created Man in his own image; in Syria, it is the government who created the opposition in its own image.”” (Schell 2013, 30). While these words were intended as a barb against the ineffectiveness of the political opposition against the Syrian regime, they perfectly capture the perception among Syrians of the regime erected by Hafiz al-Assad following his coup d’état in 1970, ending several years of querulous political contestation. In a country with a shaky and fractious political history since the end of World War I, and characterized by many cleavages—social, economic, ethnic, and sectarian—Assad had, by the late 1990s, amassed such widespread control and unchecked power over Syrian political life that the God-like allusion

was prevalent among Syrians from all walks of life. That is, until March 2011.

The regime Hafez al-Assad built—with an equal measure of daring, cunning, conspiratorial politics, patience, strong-arm repressive tactics, and outright mass violence—was a traditional authoritarian structure predicated on four main tiers of power. Namely a pyramid with him at the top holding all the strings, followed by the “unpublicized chiefs of the multiple intelligence and security networks” and “the commanders of politically-relevant, regime-shielding, coup-deterring, elite armed formations,” then the Ba’ath Party organization, and at the very bottom, the apparatus of government (Batatu 1999, 206—207). Assad was the first Syrian ruler of peasant extraction, the first of the heterodox, and prior to the Ba’ath’s ascension, marginalized, Alawite sect. Given the nature of his regime, and Assad’s own proclivities and experiences, he chose to maintain a tight, yet narrow, power base. The few men with any real power in Syria under Assad, were invariably from his own Alawite sect, with some even belonging to his or his wife’s immediate family. His rule was characterized by an intractable position vis-à-vis Israel and a much-publicized championing of Palestinian and Arab rights; as well as tight regimentation of political life under an all-pervasive, yet wholly subservient to his person, omnipotent security apparatus, and a Ba’ath-controlled bureaucracy.

Regime stability became the paramount concern of all life in Syria. Assad inexorably linked the existence of his regime to the very existence of the state itself. Therefore, a threat to the regime, no matter how insignificant, became akin to a threat to national security. This may explain the ruthlessness that the regime employed against its

opposition. For Assad “[t]he over-riding, all-pervading objective has been the maintenance of the regime, not out of any particular sense of responsibility to the populace at large, not in the service of any particular grand vision, but simply as an end in itself.” Given the primacy of regime security, all other aspects of governance became subjected thereto, and trivial in comparison—including the economy. Assad “did not allow economic interests to shape Syrian foreign policy, regardless of the situation of the Syrian people” (Scheller 2013, 17).

When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000 his son and dynastic successor, Bashar, inherited a well-oiled repressive machinery with which to secure the continued existence of the regime. Yet he also inherited a regime with built-in vulnerabilities in need of continuous addressing. The glaring over-representation of Alawite officers of rural origin, continued to stigmatize the Sunni majority’s view of the regime. Their ire had led to open rebellion in the 1980s—culminating at Hama in 1982, that was crushed mercilessly by Assad Sr. The regime increasingly relied on its draconian security and praetorian guard units—and, in turn, increased their leverage. This leverage was manifest as tolerance of their “corrupt practices and immunity from the law, practices that became a drain on the public sector and an obstacle to the revival of the private sector” (Hinnebusch 2012, 97). With an economy that had negative GDP growth during the disastrous 1980s, and an average GDP growth not exceeding 1.1% per annum in the 1990s, Bashar’s economic inheritance was Syria’s albatross.

Therefore, at the beginning of the 2000s, Bashar embarked on a project of authoritarian upgrade that included economic liberalization. Assad, rather than looking to

Russia—at the time itself barely emerging from the destabilizing maelstrom of the Yeltsin era— looked to China for guidance. The ‘Chinese model’ of “top-down economic liberalization without political reform... [and] attention to political stability and social peace” was considered an economically-rewarding and politically-safe approach. It seemed to offer “a model of successful authoritarian upgrading” (Heydemann 2007, 25). Despite a sluggish start, by the mid-2000’s the economy had started to grow—5 per cent in 2006, and 4 per cent in 2007 and 2008. This was partly because of a robust growth in oil revenues, due to the higher world market prices. Thus “revenue from oil exports doubled between 2000 and 2005 owing to high prices and [the illegal] oil trade with Iraq, enabling the regime to build up a reserve of official foreign assets of around US\$18 billion, a security buffer that reached 68 per cent of GDP in 2002” (Hinnebusch 2012, 101).

Yet authoritarian upgrading “intended to address these shortcomings [of Bashar’s father’s regime], was itself fatally flawed.” Despite a relaxing of some of the more repressive regime controls on political organization, power continued to rest with an intensely exclusive circle in Assad’s clan. The newly generated national wealth, rather than ‘trickling-down’ to benefit the general populace, padded the bank accounts of those at the top tier of power, and their retinues of crony capitalists. Bashar’s ‘gamble’ that “the economic and social payoffs of upgrading for some segments of [...] society will exceed the costs that are imposed on those it excludes and marginalizes” (Heydemann 2007, 28) seems to have failed—miserably so. Unemployment, especially among young people, soared up to 20 per cent according to some estimates. The clientelist networks painstakingly built and nurtured by Bashar’s

father, were irrevocably damaged. The regime's increasing reliance on the "Assad-Makhlouf family clan, with a resulting overconcentration of patronage, opportunities and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients" (Hinnebusch 2012, 99) further narrowed the regime's power base. Rami Makhlouf, the president's maternal cousin, became Syria's top mogul with shares and interests throughout the economy. Unlike the erstwhile crop of shadowy and largely discreet regime-created businessmen, he cut a rather public and flamboyant figure. He was a prominent board member of the country's first and largest holding company comprising 50 of the wealthiest—and mostly regime-affiliated—businessmen in Syria. Yet his largest, and most publicized, project was Syriatel, the country's first private telecom company, in which he held a 55 per cent share. As an indicator of the influence Makhlouf had attained through his business, in June 2006 he announced that "Syriatel's tax payments alone represented 1.7 percent of Syria's GDP" (Heydemann 2007, 14).

Such wanton display of wealth and power only exacerbated the frustration and disenchantment of an increasingly alienated population. It also focused the masses' anger on the pinnacle of power. The regime had, through the process of selective liberalization and authoritarian upgrade, lost some of its original social base. "The President was warned that the people perceived the state to be 'abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich'" (Hinnebusch 2012, 102). Yet the call seems to have fallen on deaf ears. The regime's new social alliance comprised "the crony capitalists (its strongest supporters), urban government employees and the minorities, especially Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians" (ibid., 110) The embers of discontent were

stoked, until the outbreak of the Arab Spring, when it all came to a head.

Unlike his father, or Russia under Putin, Bashar al-Assad seems to have all but abandoned the regime's nationalist rhetoric. Unlike his father, who claimed to have battled Israel, Bashar did not come to power with any true 'nationalistic' credentials. His regime additionally lacks any genuine success stories in foreign policy. While the regime's stance in the 2003 Iraq War did earn it some popularity, this seems to have been an anomaly. Damascus was accused of being responsible for the 2005 assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and necessitated a humiliating withdrawal from Lebanon, international ostracization, and severe diplomatic pressures. Repeated Israeli air incursions into Syria have also exposed the regime's weaknesses. Finally, its alliance with Iran, while strong, was becoming increasingly unpopular. It may be safely said that "[i]n a material and an immaterial sense, Bashar's system of governance was simply unable to offer Syrian citizens what they needed and desired" (Scheller 2013, 31).

The Syrian Conflict

The Syrian regime's project of authoritarian upgrading, much like those of many other Arab regimes, met its moment of truth with the groundswell of popular discontent that became known as the Arab Spring. From all available evidence, the Syrian Revolution "came as a surprise for the Syrian government," which had thought that the rules of 1982's bloody 'Hama Lesson' still prevailed. Years of internal political stasis, and the success with which the regime had "depoliticized society by repressing dissidents"

(Scheller 2013, 2), had bred a certain sense of complacency, so that the popular revolt against the regime, came both as a rude awakening, and represented a flagrant failure of its authoritarian upgrade project. An increasingly violent response by the regime to the largely peaceful demonstrations led the country to sink into an intractable bloody conflict that threatens its very existence.

Russia's interest in the Middle East predates the current conflict. It even predates the Soviet era, going back as far as the 16th century. "The interest had to do with strategic concerns—access to the "warm waters" of the Mediterranean," but also "manifested a somewhat genuine, yet mostly realist trend of religious interest in the Orthodox communities in the Middle East" (Hopwood 1969, 1—17). This continued during the Cold War years, with the Soviet Union becoming Syria's strategic backer, but waned with Russia playing a marginal role in Syria's foreign policy between 1990 and 2011 (Scheller 2013, 201). Early on in the revolt, Russia came to the support of the embattled Syrian regime. For instance, "between July and September 2012 there were eight flights from Russia to Syria, each delivering 30 tons of bank notes" (ibid., 206). Russia additionally supplied arms to the regime, and vetoed several UN Security Council Resolutions against it.

One reason given for such strong support was Russia's strategic interest in the Eastern Mediterranean, centered around the Tartous naval base. Yet the base, whose lease began in the waning years of the Soviet Union, is "[I]imited in size and in poor condition," with "its main value [...] seemingly symbolic." Had it been the locus of Russia's attention, it could have pressured an incumbent regime to make arrangements to safeguard it. Another reason given

is Russia's fear of rising Islamism in the region, with Russia supposedly projecting "its own security concerns from its experience in the Northern Caucasus on Syria" (ibid., 205). However, armed jihadi Islamic factions were only a recent development in the conflict, and Russia's unwavering support of the regime predates their existence; and while it may offer an explanation for the added determination in Russia's backing of the regime, it is unlikely to be the reason behind it. Lastly, Russia's support of the Syrian regime is explained against the backdrop of Russo-American rivalry: "From the Russian side, the intensity of interaction with Syria has been closely connected to the quality of relations between Moscow and Washington." According to this view "rapprochement with Syria offered [Russia] an opportunity to frustrate Western policy" (ibid., 207). The latter explanation may be closest to the truth, as it also dovetails with the sense of *derzhavnost* mentioned previously. Putin's Russia would certainly like to view itself on an equal footing with the U.S., as it had been during the Cold War. Rather than being driven by nationalist sentiment—although certainly colored by such rhetoric—the choice to support Bashar al-Assad's regime is grounded in a desire to confirm Russia's international stature. It serves to validate Russia's, and Putin's, successful reversal of Russia's dismal recent past: foreign policy as validation of internal policy choices.

Yet the apparent resilience of the Russo-Syrian alliance needs to be qualified. For despite sharing an authoritarian system—albeit with somewhat differing levels of intensity—and an inflated role of the president therein, there are also marked differences. Firstly, in Russia's case, the state, while tightly controlled by Putin and his ruling elite, is not uniquely identified with his person. This was

manifest in the largely smooth transition of the Presidency to Medvedev in 2008. The same cannot be said of the Syrian regime, which is profoundly personalized and tied to the person of the president. Any harm to, or change of, Assad's person or prerogatives would almost certainly mean a collapse of the entire structure. This explains the regime's immediate violent reaction to what were, at the onset, largely peaceful demands for reform. Secondly, while both regimes have a long history of repressing dissent, there remains a wide gap in the severity and prevalence of such repression. The Russian system, despite all its "dictatorial reputation," has actually "consistently displayed extreme nervousness in the face of social movements." This is reflected in the state's deferral of "increases in charges for gas, water and electricity, for fear of provoking a reaction" (Pirani 2010, 197). The same cannot be said of the Syrian regime whose response to civil dissent, as is well-documented, had from the beginning been widespread state violence and repression. Thirdly, while both regimes embarked on authoritarian upgrade projects aiming to consolidate their grip on power, the outcomes were very different. While people near the pinnacle of power were the biggest beneficiaries in Russia, the reforms also had a tangible impact on improving the lives of ordinary Russians. As a result of the state's reforms, "[T]he average wage rose more than fivefold in dollar terms." By the mid-2000's most Russians "in many respects regained, and in some respects surpassed, the material level they had attained in the late Soviet period." This gave Putin a modicum of popular support (Pirani 2010, 48). As explained above, the Syrian regime simply failed to share any meaningful proportion of the economic gains with the populace. This resulted in the current revolt, which may still signal the regime's demise—despite Russian support.

In conclusion, Russian political decision-making under Putin, particularly in the area of foreign relations, is characterized by a high degree of flexibility and pragmatism. Russia's accommodation to NATO strikes against Libya is one example of its capacity to accommodate, while its backing of the Syrian regime is an example of confrontational politics. Even in its handling of the Syrian conflict, Russia has displayed a great degree of pragmatism, giving several hints that it is not wholly committed to Assad personally. One other aspect of Russian pragmatism is the manner in which the issue of the regime's chemical weapons' stockpiles was deftly negotiated and a deal struck with the Americans. Given the current deadlock in the conflict, the Syrian regime still enjoys what seems like unwavering Russian support. Yet it also seems to realize that such support may no longer be there if Russia's interests change.

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