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## The socio-economic roots of Syria's uprising

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While the outbreak of revolution in 2011 took many by surprise, the pre-conditions for such an upheaval had accumulated for decades.

In March 2011, protests broke out in the southern Syrian

province of Daraa, and swiftly expanded to Latakia, Homs, Idlib and Deir al-Zor governorates before eventually spreading throughout the country. Despite taking place in the context of the Arab Spring, the Syrian revolution developed in different ways from its Egyptian and Tunisian precursors; moving from peaceful protests initially to a violent crackdown by the Assad regime, which led in turn to the militarization of the revolution and subsequent foreign interventions.

Often overlooked in discussions of the factors that led Syria to join the region-wide wave of mass uprisings in 2011 is the role of socio-economic forces. Yet without taking stock of these drivers—the economic growth and developmental model applied since the 1970 coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power, and the economic liberalization accelerated under the subsequent rule of his son, Bashar—no account of the roots of Syria's uprising can be complete.

### Syria's economic growth under Hafez al-Assad's Baath Party

The Lebanese Marxist philosopher Gilbert Achcar has argued that the Syrian upheaval is deeply rooted in different socio-economic conditions that, together with political, historical, and geopolitical factors, led to the revolutionary explosions of 2011.

From a development point of view, the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) region as a whole has suffered a sizeable crisis. Between 1970 and 1990, most of the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita stagnated, and most MENA countries scored relatively low on the Human

Development Index (HDI) in relation to their per capita income. Syria presents the main regional dynamics in terms of political economy, class and state formation of the country, in addition to peculiar country-specific dynamics.

In other words, the roots of the Syrian revolution are to be found not in the sectarian divisions of the country or the Western conspiracy theories promoted in regime propaganda, but rather in the worsening of social and economic conditions in Syria. This was the direct result of a process of neoliberalization and privatization started under Hafez Al-Assad, and which was accelerated considerably after 2000 with Bashar's rise to power.

The result of these neoliberal policies was increased poverty among the lower social strata and the rapid emergence of a new bourgeoisie, which derived its fortunes from having close ties with the Assad regime. This, to quote Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl, meant that the cost of the stabilization of the state Hafez started was "a gradual deterioration into neopatrimonial rule."

Following the Baath Party's coup d'état in 1963, most of the developmental drive of the country focused on land reforms and state-led development. The Party, inspired by Gamal Abdel Nasser's agenda in Egypt, put the state economy under extreme pressure, since it aimed at providing free education, undertaking large industrial projects, and promoting state interventionism in the state economy **without solving the issues** of low productivity and high corruption, in addition to struggling to keep up with population growth. However, the neopatrimonial structure of the Syrian regime maintained corruption at high levels

through the decades, and according to Transparency International data, Syria was ranked 127 out of 178 countries in the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Gradually, Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI)—that is, the replacement of foreign imports with domestic production—was abandoned in favour of market-driven liberalization. The withdrawal of the state from the economy **happened in two major waves**; the first in the early 1970s and the second in the mid-1980s. During the 1970s, agrarian reforms had been a key policy, but were later reversed into privatization of the land—a key feature of the rule of Assad fils. On the other hand, in the 1980s—in an attempt to contain domestic discontent and to restart the economic engine of the country—Hafez al-Assad pushed a neoliberal opening to foreign capital and ‘liberated’ the economy from public-sector domination, while still maintaining an extensive bureaucratic apparatus. By the 1980s the bureaucratic and public sector alone **employed approximately 20%** of the total workforce of the country.

This strategic move tried to compensate for the exhaustion of the external rent in what Volker Perthes defined as an “authoritarian adjustment” to grant the regime stability. In this way, Hafez al-Assad intended to obtain, to quote from Robin Yassin-Kassab’s and Leila al-Shami’s *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, the consent of a “cross-sectarian peasant constituency by redistributing land and improving rural conditions [...] Previously marginalised groups, particularly Alawis, found employment in the new army and security services, while the urban working and middle classes benefitted from subsidised goods and jobs in the bureaucracy.”

## The emergence of state bourgeoisie

These neoliberal policies benefited only a small portion of society. Under Hafez al-Assad, loyalty to the regime was a crucial aspect of his consolidation of power, and the Baath Party became its main influence vehicle for patronage. The corruption and low productivity sprawling from it, when met with privatization measures, led to the entrenchment of a new, crony capitalist upper class made out of a small elite strongly tied to the ruling family. A notorious example is the Makhlouf family, with Rami Makhlouf, Bashar's cousin, "estimated," as Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami write, "to control some 60 per cent of the economy." To quote Achcar again: "With a personal fortune estimated at \$6 billion, Makhlouf owns or controls an impressive list of companies in a wide range of sectors: banking, insurance, oil, industry, real estate, tourism, media, and so on."

The model promoted by Hafez led to the complete crushing of all independent workers' and peasants' unions, women's movements and youth unions, all of which by the end of his rule were, in Yassin-Kassab's and al-Shami's words, "entirely absorbed into the state machinery."

## Bashar's rule

When Hafez' son Bashar took over upon the former's death in 2000, he accelerated the neoliberal reforms his father had started. A process of market liberalization was initiated in the 2000s as part of Syria's transition to a social market economy, and the private sector, which represented 52 per

cent of GDP in 2000, had risen to 61 percent **by 2007**.

While the rise of foreign investment “**drove a boom** in trade, banking, housing, construction, and tourism in the latter years of the decade,” the agricultural share of GDP declined from 7.8 per cent to 2.2 per cent between 2005 and 2010. This meant that not only were most Syrians repressed politically, but more and more were suffering economically as well. **According to a UNDP report**, poverty increased from 30.1% of Syria’s population living below the ‘upper’ poverty line in 2004 to 33.6% in 2007. This meant that almost 7 million Syrians were considered poor, including 56% of those living in the countryside.

**Social indicators show us** that despite the increase in GDP per capita at purchasing-power parity (PPP), this growth was not redistributed among the population but instead brought an increase of poverty, unemployment, and social inequalities. The growing poverty, especially among the rural working class, was exacerbated by the cancellation of state subsidies after 2005, which had particularly negative effects in north-eastern Syria during the severe drought between 2006 and 2010. ~~According to a Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR)~~ **report in 2009**, the northern and eastern regions had the highest poverty rates in the country.

A study by the journalist Francesca de Châtel on this drought in the north-east between 2006 and 2010 stresses the crucial role it had in leading one of the poorest and most deprived parts of Syria to join the uprising. The region “**was also** the country’s breadbasket and source of oil [...] Since 2000, this region has been rapidly sinking further into poverty as groundwater reserves were depleted and a



series of overambitious agricultural development projects overstretched both land and water resources.”

We see time and again a close correlation between the neglected state of rural areas and the peripheral outbreak of the Syrian revolution.

Contrary to the Egyptian revolution, where the masses gathered in the now-symbolic Tahrir Square in Cairo to ask for freedom, in Syria the revolution originated in the periphery—from the region of Daraa—and swiftly spread to the largest two cities; the capital Damascus and Aleppo. This is not because the urban cities did not share the same aspirations, but rather was due to the tight control of the Assad regime on the major cities. It should also be noted that major cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs had grown quickly in the previous decade, attempting to absorb the waves of migration due to the pauperization of the rural areas.

In relation to the peripheral upheaval that Syria witnessed in March 2011, it is important to briefly mention the role of the military complex and its development. At the core of the tight control the Assad family developed over Syria is the strengthening of the military and security apparatus.

This strategic development of an extensive mukhabarat (intelligence) network provided the regime with powerful and wide-ranging control of the population, especially in the larger urban areas. The development of a strong military complex became crucial in the stratification of society. By placing members of the Assad family in high positions, especially in the Praetorian Guard, over four decades the regime developed a strong military-sectarian complex

closely tied to the Assad family and, **therefore**, “willing to go to war against the majority of their country’s populace to defend the regime.” The sectarian distinction made it possible for the Alawite elite to retain full control of the political and military apparatus of the state, while the Sunni elites, who thrived under Hafez and obtained great economic power, saw themselves marginalized under Bashar as the ruling family strengthened its connection with the Alawite clan.

## Unemployment and education

The sharpening of social schisms in the country was also exacerbated by increasing growth in youth unemployment. High birth rates, combined with free education, had created a great number of young, educated Syrians that the labor market could not absorb. With over half the population under the age of 25, **it is estimated that** around 250,000 people were entering the labor market each year before the revolution. Literacy rates and healthcare expenditure had increased steadily despite the deepening of the social gap, already experienced during the socialist period under the Baath, as demonstrated by the increase in the GINI index of inequality from 33.7 in 1997 to 37.4 in 2004.

Mismanagement of resources, corruption, skyrocketing unemployment—especially high among the youth—are among the most common features of the neoliberal wave that hit the MENA region after the June 1967 war. Indeed, that war is often considered to mark the shift in Arab countries toward neoliberal policies to counter internal discontent following the Arab armies’ defeat. In Syria, this



defeat was particularly hard due to the heavy burden of war efforts and the humiliating loss of the Golan Heights following Assad's Communique No.66

Daraa, the largest city in the Hawran valley, located just a few kilometres from the Jordanian border, was already deeply impoverished due to the depletion of water resources, forcing some farmers to turn from the agricultural sector to opening chicken farms. In early March 2011, just days before protests broke out, an International Crisis Group team **reported** that "local residents warned of an explosive situation; any spark might cause it to detonate."

## Repression of freedom

Of course, economic factors alone do not suffice to explain the Syrian uprising, which was also a reaction to decades of severe, often very bloody political repression.

In the period leading up to the events of 2011, the region had been experiencing an increase in social struggles. Whereas in Tunisia and Egypt, trade unions and workers' movements played a crucial role in the outbreak of the uprisings, no independent trade union had existed in Syria for decades, as a matter of regime policy. The regime, indeed, controlled every aspect of society. Radio and television outlets were almost entirely state-owned. Tellingly, the country was known in the Arab world as 'the kingdom of silence.'

At the turn of the century, with Bashar's arrival to power, many Syrians and external observers believed the leader's

liberal democratic discourse. He pledged to improve transparency and accountability, fight corruption and cronyism, and in the first six months of his rule, he granted amnesty to a number of political prisoners and exiled dissidents. Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami write that, “Among the optimists who believed it would now be possible to revive the suffocated public space were a small number of intellectuals, professionals and cultural figures.” This led to the so-called Damascus Spring, which, together with the Damascus Declaration of 2005 would represent the most important civil society mobilization preceding the 2011 uprising.

Yet the opening of the public space did not last long, and the country soon returned into ‘silence.’ A Freedom House report in 2010 ranked Syria the 178th country worldwide in terms of freedom, with a repression of freedom score of 83 per cent, on par with Saudi Arabia. Within the region, only Israel/Palestine, Tunisia, and Libya ranked lower.

### Conclusion: an inevitable eruption

When the popular unrest of the Arab Spring broke out in late 2010, the belief that Syria would not be affected was widespread. This was due to the fact the Assad family had successfully managed a dynastic succession in 2000, and to the expansion of the military complex and its role in cementing the regime’s stability. In reality, however, the pre-conditions for a major upheaval had steadily formed and consolidated over decades. Given the combination of the factors outlined above—the impoverishment of rural areas; the emergence of a state bourgeoisie; and the

entrenchment of crony capitalism by the neoliberal policies adopted during the forty years of Assad family rule—with various other geopolitical, historical, and political forces beyond the scope of this essay, the eruption of Syrian society witnessed in 2011 had always been a question less of ‘if’ than ‘when.’