

**POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND
THE MIDDLE EAST (VI): THE SYRIAN PEOPLE'S
SLOW MOTION REVOLUTION**

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POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VI): THE SYRIAN PEOPLE'S SLOW-MOTION REVOLUTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian uprising has defied conventional expectations and patterns established elsewhere in the region from the outset. It happened, first of all, and to many that in itself was surprising enough. The regime was not alone in believing in a form of Syrian exceptionalism that would shield it from serious popular unrest. Once the uprising began, it did not develop quickly, as in Egypt or Tunisia. Although it did not remain peaceful, it did not descend into a violent civil war, as in Libya, or sectarian affair, as in Bahrain. To this day, the outcome remains in doubt. Demonstrations have been growing in impressive fashion but have yet to attain critical mass. Regime support has been declining as the security services' brutality has intensified, but many constituents still prefer the status quo to an uncertain and potentially chaotic future. What is clear, however, is the degree to which a wide array of social groups, many once pillars of the regime, have turned against it and how relations between state and society have been forever altered.

The regime's first mistake in dealing with the protests was to misdiagnose them. It is not fair to say that, in response to the initial signs of unrest, the regime did nothing. It decreed an amnesty and released several prominent critics; officials were instructed to pay greater attention to citizen complaints; and in a number of localities steps were taken to pacify restive populations. But the regime acted as if each and every disturbance was an isolated case requiring a pin-point reaction rather than part of a national crisis that would only deepen short of radical change.

Over the past decade, conditions significantly worsened virtually across the board. Salaries largely stagnated even as the cost of living sharply increased. Cheap imported goods wreaked havoc on small manufacturers, notably in the capital's working-class outskirts. In rural areas, hardship caused by economic liberalisation was compounded by the drought. Neglect and pauperisation of the countryside prompted an exodus of underprivileged Syrians to rare hubs of economic activity. Cities such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs witnessed the development of sprawling suburbs that absorbed rural migrants. Members of the

state-employed middle class, caught between, on the one hand, low salaries, shrinking subsidies and services and, on the other, rising expenses, have been pushed out of the city centre toward the underdeveloped belt that surrounds Damascus. The ruling elite's arrogance and greed made this predicament more intolerable. Meanwhile, promises of political reform essentially had come to naught.

Much of this has been true for a while, but the regional context made all the difference. That the Syrian public's outlook was changing in reaction to events elsewhere might not have been manifest, but telltale signs were there. Well ahead of the mid-March 2011 commencement of serious disturbances, the impact of regional turmoil could be felt in the behaviour of ordinary Syrians. In what had long been – or forced to become – a depoliticised society, casual discussions suddenly assumed a surprisingly political tone. What the regime used to do and get away with came under intense and critical public scrutiny. Subtle expressions of insubordination surfaced. Previously routine – and unchallenged – forms of harassment and extortion by civil servants met unusual resistance on the part of ordinary citizens, emboldened by what they had seen in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond. More broadly, Syrians – who like to imagine themselves as the Arab vanguard – increasingly were frustrated at being left on the sidelines of history at a time when much of the region was rising up.

Taking small steps to coax the population, the regime also repressed, often brutally and indiscriminately. That might have worked in the past. This time, it guaranteed the movement's nationwide extension. Wherever protests broke out, excessive use of force broadened the movement's reach as relatives, friends, colleagues and other citizens outraged by the regime's conduct joined in. Worse still, the regime's strategy of denial and repression meant that it could not come to terms with the self-defeating social and political consequences of its actions.

The regime also got it wrong when it tried to characterise its foes. Syrian authorities claim they are fighting a foreign-sponsored, Islamist conspiracy, when for the most

part they have been waging war against their original social constituency. When it first came to power, the Assad regime embodied the neglected countryside, its peasants and exploited underclass. Today's ruling elite has forgotten its roots. It has inherited power rather than fought for it, grown up in Damascus, mingled with and mimicked the ways of the urban upper class and led a process of economic liberalisation that has benefited large cities at the provinces' expense. The state abandoned vast areas of the nation, increasingly handling them through corrupt and arrogant security forces. There is an Islamist undercurrent to the uprising, no doubt. But it is a product of the regime's decades of socio-economic neglect far more than it reflects an outside conspiracy by religious fundamentalists.

True, areas with strong minority concentrations have been slow to rise up; likewise, Damascus and Aleppo have been relatively quiescent, and the business community has remained circumspect. But the loyalty these groups once felt for the regime has been under threat for some time. Most, in one form or another, have suffered from the predatory practices of a ruling class that, increasingly, has treated the country as private property. Even Allawites, a minority group to which the ruling family and a disproportionate share of the security services belong, long have had reason to complain, chafing at the sight of an ever-narrowing elite that does not even bother to redistribute wealth to its own community.

That leaves the security apparatus, which many observers believe constitute the regime's ultimate card – not the regular army, distrusted, hollowed out and long demoralised, but praetorian units such as the Republican Guard and various strands of the secret police generically known as the *Mukhabarat* and disproportionately composed of Allawites. The regime seems to believe so, too, and has dispatched its forces to engage in ruthless displays of muscle, sometimes amounting to collective punishment. Over the years, these forces undoubtedly have served the regime well; in recent months, too, they have shown no mercy in efforts to crush the protest movement.

But here as well appearances can be deceiving. From the outset of the crisis, many among the security forces were dissatisfied and eager for change; most are underpaid, overworked and repelled by high-level corruption. They have closed ranks behind the regime, though it has been less out of loyalty than a result of the sectarian prism through which they view the protest movement and of an ensuing communal defence mechanism. The brutality to which many among them have resorted arguably further encourages them to stand behind the regime for fear of likely retaliation were it to collapse.

Yet, the sectarian survival instinct upon which the regime relies could backfire. The most die-hard within the security apparatus might well be prepared to fight till the bit-

ter end. But the majority will find it hard to keep this up. After enough of this mindless violence, this same sectarian survival instinct could push them the other way. After centuries of discrimination and persecution at the hands of the Sunni majority, Allawites and other religious minorities concluded that their villages within relatively inaccessible mountainous areas offered the only genuine sanctuary. They are unlikely to believe their safety is ensured in the capital (where they feel like transient guests), by the Assad regime (which they view as a temporary, historical anomaly), or through state institutions (which they do not trust). When they begin to feel that the end is near, Allawites might not fight to the last man. They might well return to the mountains. They might well go home.

This report, part of a series on the popular movements in North Africa and the Middle East, is the first of two that will look in detail at Syria's uprising. It focuses chiefly on the inception and makeup of the protest movement. The second, to be published shortly, will focus on the regime's response.

Damascus/Brussels, 6 July 2011

POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (VI): THE SYRIAN PEOPLE'S SLOW-MOTION REVOLUTION

I. INTRODUCTION: A REGIME'S UNMAKING

Unlike its Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, the Syrian regime initially appeared in the eyes of many observers and analysts to be relatively immune to the wave of popular protests sweeping the region. Although Syrians had ample reason for frustration, President Bashar Assad enjoyed several distinctive assets that, in theory, could have helped contain and minimise any unrest. Instead, and mostly as a result of its own actions, the regime has turned a deep sense of malaise into a full-blown protest movement and transformed a manageable crisis into one that is increasingly dangerous both to itself and to its people.

When, in early 2011, protests swiftly spread from Tunisia to Egypt and then to much of the Arab world,¹ Syria at first stood out as a rare exception. The mid-March outbreak of large demonstrations thus came as a surprise to most outside commentators,² Damascus-based diplomats and Syrian officials. Until then, regime foes and allies alike for the most part shared in the consensus view that the regime would be spared because of its several unique features.

Topping the list was Syria's strategic posture. In contrast to virtually all other Arab states, the regime had implemented a foreign policy largely in tune with public opinion. Its open defiance of a regional order seen as serving U.S. and Israeli interests, criticism of their local allies, condemnation of the Iraq invasion and support for Hamas and Hizbollah resonated with public sentiment. In this sense, Damascus credibly could claim to be upholding Arabist principles and defending Arab dignity.³ As President Bashar Assad argued in a *Wall Street Journal* interview, such a posture was expected to "immunise" his country from the kind of popular anger targeting pro-Western regimes.⁴

Analysts and observers likewise pointed to Assad's personal standing. After inheriting power from his father in 2000, Bashar sought to usher Syria into a new era. He did so not through dramatic reforms but rather via small changes in both style and substance whose cumulative effect nonetheless was significant. In a break with the previously suffocating and martial atmosphere – in which repression was ruthless as well as pervasive, schoolchildren were forced to wear military uniforms and the choice of con-

¹ See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Reports N°101, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, 24 February 2011; N°102, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution*, 10 March 2011; N°105, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, 6 April 2011; N°106, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way*, 6 April 2011; and N°107, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*, 6 June 2011.

² See, eg, "Syria: 'A Kingdom of Silence'", Aljazeera.net, 9 February 2011; Michael Bröning, "The Sturdy House That Assad Built. Why Damascus Is Not Cairo", Foreignaffairs.com, 7 March 2011; Bassam Haddad, "Why Syria Is Unlikely to be Next ... for Now", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 9 March 2011. For a more prophetic analysis, see Ignace Leverrier, "Pourquoi la Syrie n'a-t-elle pas (encore...) bougé?", *Nouvel Observateur*, 25 February 2011.

³ A presidential adviser said, "one issue at stake throughout the region is dignity. In Tunisia and Egypt it was all but gone. Here, people can identify with the regime's posture". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 February 2011. A local journalist summed up popular perceptions of Syrian foreign policy: "Foreign policy has worked as a source of legitimisation since [Bashar's father] Hafez, who developed a very effective narrative. Basically he would say that Syria may not be able to liberate Palestine on its own, but it can contribute to a collective effort; it may not be able to liberate its own land occupied by Israel, but it won't make concessions either. Syrians on the street see this stance as a source of pride and dignity, which helps them countenance the daily hardship and humiliations they also associate with the regime". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 3 December 2009.

⁴ See "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad", *Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011. Assad said, "we have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance".

sumer goods was highly restricted – Syria entered the 21st century with a whiff of modernity. The regime unquestionably continued to severely curtail civil rights and liberties, and retribution for any form of visible dissent still was the norm. But it became far easier for ordinary citizens to get on with their lives and, compared to the reign of fear they imposed in the 1980s, security services were less intrusive and more restrained.

Bashar's relatively clean personal record, his removal of regime stalwarts who embodied the darkest chapters of his father's legacy, casual demeanour and marriage to British-raised Asma Akhras, as well as efforts to reform the economy all suggested at the very least a more progressive outlook. With time, many Syrians came to view him as somewhat alien to the regime he inherited, sparing him even as they blamed it for many of their woes. Speaking in early 2010, a local journalist commented: "People are always finding excuses for Bashar, saying he is not well-informed or well-advised".⁵

Throughout his first decade in office, Assad fought his own battles and progressively earned a measure of respect for his political grit. He asserted his authority over what at first was an unruly regime; overcame internal resistance to structural economic reforms; confronted massive external pressure; and won notable foreign policy successes in a region increasingly beset by turmoil.⁶ In the eyes of some of his citizens, he came to be perceived as a rather benevolent dictator – one who might bring about change, protect his nation's dignity and safeguard national unity.⁷

That last point was critical. Many Sunni Arabs (who constitute the majority of the population) undoubtedly resent the disproportionate power wielded by the minority Allawite community to which both Assad and a large proportion of the security apparatus belong.⁸ At the same time, fear of

possible Sunni Islamist hegemonic rule, shared by members of various minority groups (Allawite, Christian, Druze, Tsherkess, Shiite, etc.) and secular Sunnis, concern over the risks of a putative sectarian breakup, along with a pervasive sense of mutual distrust among communities, have contributed to the perception of this regime as a lesser evil. The Lebanese and Iraqi civil wars that unfolded across the country's borders further fuelled popular anxiety over the potential implications of conflict in a mixed religious setting.⁹

To a large extent, of course, the regime bore responsibility for the sectarian dynamics it claimed to be combating. Far from fostering the emergence of a genuine national sentiment and feeling of citizenship, it has done its best to promote and solidify communal divides,¹⁰ thereby hoping to be seen as the sole bulwark against a perilous confessional fragmentation.¹¹

In addition, many believed that the security services – considered to be more repressive and cohesive than regional counterparts – could quash any potential protest movement. Over the years, the regime proved adept at suppressing all forms of organised dissent. Any serious strife was expected to be met with the kind of extreme violence witnessed in the early 1980s, when the regime committed horrendous crimes in putting down a Muslim

against within contemporary Syria until the current regime took over in 1970.

⁹"People are afraid that blood will be shed, that any mobilisation will quickly turn into another faceoff between Allawites and Sunnis. We are Christians, and there are two tendencies in my family. Some want this era to end at any cost. Others stress the risks of chaos and say things such as 'let the president stay but the people around him must go'. This talk is typical of minority groups". Crisis Group interview, Syrian intellectual, Damascus, 12 February 2011.

¹⁰A human rights activist lamented: "This society is far more fragmented than Tunisia's or Egypt's. People feel more sympathy for Gazans or Tunisians than for their fellow citizens". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 February 2011. A Damascus-based journalist called friends in the city of Hassaka to confirm a rumour that someone there had set himself on fire, emulating the Tunisian street-peddler whose suicide served as a trigger to a nationwide uprising. The standard answer was: "Even if ten of us in Hassaka did so, who elsewhere in Syria would care?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 2 February 2011.

¹¹A dissident intellectual pointed out: "Our societies fall somewhere along the spectrum from civility and citizenship on one side to tribalism and sectarianism on the other. Typically, our regimes nurture the latter characteristics more than our societies cling to them. However, the Syrian opposition is also deeply sectarian in its makeup and doesn't offer much of an alternative". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, January 2010.

⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009; and N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards? (II): Syria's New Hand*, 16 December 2009.

⁷ "As I travel around the country, one expression that comes up a lot is the need to 'protect the country'. People have seen what happened in Lebanon and Iraq. They distrust much of the political class but generally have faith in the president. They see him as a pillar of stability and someone who can enact gradual change". Crisis Group interview, senior party official, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

⁸ The Allawite community, which constitutes approximately 10 per cent of Syria's overall population, follows a branch of Islam that has little in common with either Sunnism or Shiism. Accused of heresy and persecuted for that reason, Allawites historically found shelter in the mountains that border Syria's Mediterranean coast. They remained exploited and discriminated

Brotherhood-led sectarian insurgency.¹² In particular, memories of the massacre perpetrated by security forces in the town of Hama in central Syria remained vivid, portending the likely response to a challenge of similar magnitude.¹³

The resulting weakness of civil society – defined as an organised constituency in favour of human rights and democracy – also was cited as a reason why anti-regime protests were unlikely to spread, let alone succeed. A nascent civil society in fact appeared in 2000, building on Bashar's proclaimed reformist inclinations.¹⁴ In the months following his father's death, a so-called Damascus spring witnessed vivid debates about the need for reforms, occurring in a range of new and proliferating forums. But this initial social awakening soon outpaced the new president's willingness or ability to enact far-reaching change in the face of entrenched resistance from within the regime; it quickly triggered a decisive crack-down.¹⁵

A second attempt to push for sweeping reforms occurred in 2005, when militants and intellectuals sought to take advantage of pressures on the regime prompted by the Lebanese crisis and Syria's growing international isolation.¹⁶ But they had picked the wrong fight at the wrong time over the wrong issues: embattled, the regime depicted its domestic opponents as tools of a foreign-led conspiracy aimed at destabilising the country under the pretence of promoting the kind of "democracy" that had led Iraq to ruin. Besides, their pursuit of lofty ideals enjoyed scant resonance among Syrians who likely would have been more receptive to a down-to-earth agenda focused on such matters as failing public services and corruption. The movement's effectiveness was further undermined by personal rivalries between individuals at times seemingly more preoccupied with gaining recognition from diplomats than from ordinary Syrians.¹⁷ By

early 2011, most of them either languished in prison or had been coerced into silence.¹⁸

The absence of abject poverty of the kind that exists in Egypt or Yemen was perceived by some as yet another advantage for the regime.¹⁹ Over the past several years, a belated, hesitant and incomplete liberalisation process failed to either generate or redistribute wealth and triggered growing social friction. But residual socialist policies provided some relief to citizens dependent on state services and subsidies. Moreover, vigorous and well-endowed Islamic charitable institutions, coupled with a flourishing informal sector, helped cushion the impact of growing economic stresses.²⁰

Finally, diplomats and local officials argued that the regime was poised to pre-empt any popular uprising by launching political reforms. Briefed by Crisis Group in late February 2011 on the impending risks of instability, a group of ten Western ambassadors almost unanimously dismissed that prospect, claiming that the regime was holding consultations on various long-awaited measures, such as enactment of a political parties law.²¹

That the leadership squandered these manifold assets testifies to the self-denial, arrogance and incompetence with which it dealt with the popular protests. In its attempts at self-preservation, the regime ultimately undermined itself in every conceivable way. Its belated and grudging realisation of the seriousness of the challenge it faced, which contrasts with society's speedy awakening, goes a long way toward explaining the suicidal dynamic that has ensued. At each stage of this unfolding crisis, authorities have reacted as if they still were in the previous one, thus paving the way for a further deterioration which they yet again were late in recognising.

¹² See Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked. The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime* (New Haven, 1991).

¹³ "The perception is that the regime will respond to any civil strife as it did in its faceoff with the Muslim Brotherhood. There will be no mercy". Crisis Group interview, Syrian lawyer, 2 February 2011. "Fear remains intense. People think of Hama and expect no less. They see the regime as way more repressive than Egypt or Tunisia". Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°24, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°39, *Syria After Lebanon, Lebanon After Syria*, 12 April 2005; and N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005.

¹⁷ A human rights activist said, "the few intellectuals who still are actively involved in politics have little understanding and access to the relevant segments of society, in particular the

youth. They stick to their old ways and are finding it difficult to adjust. They are men of the past". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

¹⁸ The passing in early February of dissident filmmaker Omar Amir Alay created an opportunity for civil society figures to congregate at his funeral. A witness said, "they appeared terrorised and paralysed. Some were interviewed by a journalist and gave the blandest comments but still expressed concern at having crossed a red line". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 8 February 2011.

¹⁹ According to an adviser to a senior Syrian official, at a cabinet meeting held during the first week of February a minister stressed three key Syrian singularities: its independent foreign policy; its president's popularity; and the absence of deep poverty. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

²⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards (I)*, op. cit.

²¹ Crisis Group briefing, Damascus, 24 February 2011.

II. THE REGIME'S INITIAL READING

A. DENIAL AND ANXIETY

Although they failed to anticipate the scope of the problem, many within the regime sensed early on that regional developments would impact their country one way or another. A close relative of Assad, upon hearing arguments as to why Syria differed from other Arab countries, agreed but added a caveat: "All those points are true, and at the same time no one in the region can feel fully comfortable".²²

The mid-January 2011 collapse of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime was ominous. Although Syrian officials were keen to stress differences between the two countries, some in fact had earlier presented Tunisia as a model to emulate – a state that had upheld secular principles, ensured economic development and maintained an effective party structure.²³ In the immediate aftermath of this seemingly solid power structure's swift collapse, Syria's security apparatus scrambled to understand what had happened, seeking insights from Tunisians living in the country.²⁴ Fearing the spread of a phenomenon they could not comprehend, security officials summoned human rights activists and dissident intellectuals, with an eye to both consulting and intimidating them.²⁵ A spate of minor incidents – police and military cars reportedly were set on fire, for example²⁶ – further focused their attention. By mid-February, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak had been forced to resign, and protests had spread to other countries. Syrian anxiety rose.

In private conversations, officials typically displayed a blend of denial and disquiet. Most emphasised Syria's specificities and strengths – mostly its militant foreign policy and the president's relative popularity – and dis-

missed a growing internet-based anti-regime campaign as lacking domestic resonance.²⁷ Others instinctively felt that they should not overlook troubling similarities. "We must take into account what happened; it may be tempting to say 'we are not Egypt', but the Egyptians themselves were saying 'we are not Tunisia' until events proved them wrong".²⁸ One official complained about his colleague's defensiveness:

Foreign policy was not the only factor that explains the Tunisia and Egyptian uprisings. A lot needs to be done in Syria on other fronts. We have been strong in politics but weak on the rule of law, fighting corruption and so on. Many already are opposed to any change, arguing that it would send a signal of weakness. I disagree: it sends a signal of strength. In our meetings, there has been a tendency to merely insist that we are very different from Egypt. But if it is a wakeup call in the region, why not be awoken by it?²⁹

Another senior official summed up the internal debate between reformists willing to move more quickly and conservatives convinced that any flexibility would project nervousness: "Both tendencies exist, but they are not particularly well structured or organised. In the final analysis, it will be up to the president. Once he makes the call, everyone will fall in line".³⁰

Divisions aside, officials by and large tended to shift from relative confidence to deep concern when presented with an analysis of the Tunisian and Egyptian precedents highlighting similarities with Syria. These included the widespread perception that the state had been hijacked by a small circle of individuals chiefly focused on self-enrichment; the arrogant and unaccountable exercise of power; the absence of any clear sense of collective purpose or direction; growing everyday hardships suffered by a majority of citizens; and the unpredictability of an overeducated, underemployed and bulging youth population.³¹

²² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 30 January 2011.

²³ Over the past several years, Syria displayed growing interest in Tunisia, a country with which it enjoys few natural ties. 2009 and 2010 saw a spectacular development in bilateral relations, notably strengthened cooperation between the Baath party and the Tunisian ruling party (Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 November 2009), an agreement to share expertise on religious issues (ibid, 8 December 2009), Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri's visit to Tunis (ibid, 25 February 2010), the signing of several technical memoranda of understanding (ibid, 14 May 2010), the Assad couple's visit (Tunis Afrique Presse, 14 July 2010) and establishment of a Syrian-Tunisian Business Council (Syrian Arab News Agency, 11 October 2010).

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, 18 January 2011.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, human rights activists, 6 and 16 February 2011.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 29 January 2011.

²⁷ "The internet campaign is mostly followed by Lebanese and Israelis, judging by IPs [which indicate the location of any computer connected to the web]. They hope to push the regime to respond in ways that could make things worse, but it won't". Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Baath party official, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, presidential palace, government, party and security officials, Damascus, February-March 2011.

Still, only a minority realised and acknowledged that time was running out.³² Most failed to evince any sense of urgency. In early March, a senior official reacted with surprise and scepticism when told that, short of dramatic reforms, the domestic situation could deteriorate in a matter of days or weeks, rather than “months or years”.³³ Convinced that the pace of reforms was not the central issue, the regime reached the consensus that any movement needed to be cautious and conservative. In the words of another senior official:

In the age of internet, we can't ignore what is happening in the rest of the region. We will focus on economic reform, but will look into political reform too. We have plans that were put on hold due to outside pressure. I think we will witness a reactivation of those plans and, possibly, their acceleration. A law on political parties might be enacted, and we might open up space for the media. But we don't feel under pressure. There is nothing spectacular to expect, whether from the regime or from society.³⁴

In his late January *Wall Street Journal* interview, Assad had set the tone: Syria's reform process, he said, was launched some time ago but was delayed because the country had come under external pressure; the nation's foreign policy had created a tight ideological bond between leadership and people; and the regime would now pursue only very gradual reforms, given regional uncertainties and internal resistance to change. He proposed a single tangible measure, namely enactment of a new municipal elections law, which probably would not happen until year's end.³⁵ Many Syrians expected the regime

to tinker at the margins but remained highly sceptical that it would tackle fundamental issues, such as high-level corruption.³⁶

B. PRACTICAL MEASURES

The regime's response comprised several steps. First were a number of measures designed to placate public opinion. The government lifted the ban on two major community websites – YouTube and Facebook; this essentially was a symbolic move, as Syrians long had found ways to access them through proxies.³⁷ It also decreed an amnesty and released some prominent critics.³⁸ Ministers were instructed to listen to citizen complaints, and local officials displayed uncharacteristic interest in popular needs; in the southern governorate of Hawran, for instance, state and party representatives visited villages in which they had not once set foot and offered to build a football field or a road.³⁹ The Baath deputy secretary general summoned a group of lawyers to solicit their help in fighting corruption.⁴⁰ In mid-March, the government put an end to the lucrative monopoly over airport taxi services that a regime crony had enjoyed.⁴¹

In an effort to alleviate economic hardships, the authorities increased the subsidy on heating fuel, established a social security fund designed to provide cash hand-outs to

³² A senior security figure said, “for now Syrians are observing trends in Tunisia and Egypt; if these point in the direction of successful popular uprisings, it will become increasingly difficult to resist the contagion effects. We must speed up reforms”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 17 February 2011. Questions as to what should be done came up frequently in meetings with Crisis Group. Several officials – whose regular interaction with an international organisation arguably was in itself a sign of open-mindedness – showed remarkable modesty, discarding their tendency to lecture, listening carefully and jotting down suggestions.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 1 March 2011. An Arab businessman with extensive ties to the regime summed up his interlocutors' arrogance: “One problem is the smugness with which the elite look down on the people. They see their people as being completely under their control; they live with this illusion of total control”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 8 January 2008.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 February 2011.

³⁵ *The Wall Street Journal*, op. cit. One sentence in particular stuck in the throats of many Syrians: “To be realistic, we have to wait for the next generation to bring [about] this reform”. Taken out of context, it was understood to mean that Bashar intended to hand the task of carrying out genuine reforms to his

son Hafez (named after his father). The full transcript is available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>.

³⁶ “Corruption at the top will not be addressed. It all has to do with a handful of people who are untouchable. They intend to target lower level corruption only”. Crisis Group interview, government adviser, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

³⁷ *The New York Times*, 9 February 2011.

³⁸ See, eg, Lina Sinjab, “Syrian activist Haitham al Maleh freed under amnesty”, BBC News, 8 March 2011.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Hawran, February 2011. Such efforts did not seem particularly well coordinated: “Low-ranking party officials are bewildered. The only clear instructions they have is to avoid referring to events in Egypt”. Crisis Group interview, journalist and member of Baath party, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

⁴⁰ A lawyer claimed that most colleagues in attendance were particularly corrupt themselves and doubted they would prove useful in that respect. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 March 2011.

⁴¹ Although the ride costs 1,500 SYP (three times the rate that would have been charged had a regular taxi meter been used), drivers reportedly were paid 5,000 SYP a month (just over \$10) and essentially relied on tips. Even then, the company occasionally withheld salary payments on the grounds of financial difficulties. A company employee requested help in bringing the scandal out in the open: “For us, this amounts to daily humiliation. But the owner is the son of some big shot, and everyone just sits on his hands and stays silent”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, July 2009.

needy families,⁴² cut back taxes on basic goods⁴³ and launched a campaign to recruit employees in some ministries. The cabinet took steps to boost employment in the private sector too⁴⁴ and stepped up aid in areas hardest hit by several years of drought.⁴⁵ It postponed enactment of several impending liberalisation reforms – including introduction of a VAT tax and suppression of residual fuel subsidies – while the final draft of the 2011-2015 five-year plan reportedly was withdrawn from circulation, for fear that its economically liberal content might further deepen popular anxiety.⁴⁶ Finally, the government announced major infrastructure projects; Assad personally inaugurated a vast irrigation scheme in the north east.⁴⁷

The regime also focused on specific constituencies it saw as potential sources of instability. As further discussed below, this involved both the traditionally restive Kurdish minority as well as residents of the Aleppo governorate.

But coaxing the population was not all the regime did. It also repressed. Security services quickly intervened at the first sign of possible dissent. In anticipation of a “Day of Rage” scheduled for Friday, 4 February, the regime deployed a large number of plainclothes officers in central Damascus. Troops reportedly were dispatched to the vicinity of Kurdish areas.⁴⁸ According to a Syrian journalist, a bland sermon was distributed to all mosques in order to minimise the risk that a religious leader might deliver an anti-regime address.⁴⁹ Fearful that an incident could occur at any given time, security services were forced to work overtime. In mid-February, a security official claimed that he had just spent his first night at home since the fall of Ben Ali, a month earlier.⁵⁰

The regime chose to make an example out of a teenage blogger, Tal Malouhi, who had been arrested two years prior as a result of her rather naïve and harmless political writings.⁵¹ Brought to trial gagged and in shackles, she was sentenced to five years imprisonment based on ludicrous espionage charges.⁵² A Syrian businessman with close ties to the regime offered his interpretation: “This was a calculated move. The subtext was: ‘Now you’re free to use the internet. Use it well’”.⁵³

The regime simultaneously was at pains to project a sense of normalcy. Officials insisted that all economic and social measures had long been planned⁵⁴ and that they were part of an on-going process.⁵⁵ A local journalist whose primary function is to convey official thinking described Syria’s stability as growing out of the government’s vibrant policy, notably the introduction of new administrative, banking, private education and media laws; he added that the reform process would be taken to the next stage in 2011 with improved municipal and Baath party elections.⁵⁶ By mid-March, regime spokespeople still publicly referred to political reforms using the vaguest of terms, quoting from the president’s *Wall Street Journal* interview.⁵⁷

Likewise, despite growing nervousness – which ordinary Syrians largely saw as a sign of distress, confusion and weakness – authorities were bent on displaying their traditional leadership style. True to form, Assad continued to be seen almost exclusively in the company of foreign delegations. When he chose to send messages to his people, he did so through the *Wall Street Journal*, in line with the well-established practice of speaking only to non-Syrian media. While citizens anxiously awaited some indication that the regime realised it was time for genuine, far-reaching change, their leader was busy discussing “the strategic relationship between the Arab world and the neighbours of the Baltic sea” with the Polish deputy prime minister. Although it was hard to imagine an encounter further removed from popular aspirations and

⁴² For details, see Phil Sands, “Syria’s poor receive cash aid from government”, *The National*, 20 February 2011. According to an official, cash payments earlier had been handed out in the impoverished north east, where tensions had been rising due to water shortages over the past several years. Crisis Group interview, adviser to senior security official, Damascus, 8 February 2011.

⁴³ Agence France-Presse, 17 February 2011.

⁴⁴ See Syria Comment, 8 March 2011. Syria Comment (www.joshualandis.com/blog/) is the blog of Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies and associate professor at the University of Oklahoma (U.S.).

⁴⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 March 2011.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, government adviser, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

⁴⁷ *Al-Hayat*, 10 March 2011.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 2 February 2011.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, 9 February 2011.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, 13 February 2011.

⁵¹ <http://talmallohi.blogspot.com/>.

⁵² Reuters, 15 February 2011; Agence France-Presse, 17 February 2011. Had these charges been true, they would have justified a much harsher verdict under Syrian law.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

⁵⁴ For an example of this narrative, see *The Syria Report*, 28 February 2011.

⁵⁵ “Some measures had long been planned. Besides, it is not our style to act quickly and show we are under pressure”. Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Damascus, 17 March 2011. In fairness, some indeed had been in the pipeline.

⁵⁶ See *Al-Hayat*, 12 February 2011.

⁵⁷ See, eg, Foreign Minister Walid Muallim’s press conference with his Spanish counterpart, Agence France-Presse, 15 March 2011.

concerns, the national news agency nonetheless made it its top story.⁵⁸

This disconnect between leadership and people arguably was most vividly on display when *Vogue* magazine published a sycophantic article on Syria's first lady. Syrians thus learned that "wildly democratic principles" governed Assad's family life and that the president was so loved that he had no need for personal security – this, in a country where security presence is pervasive. The article celebrated the Assads' proximity to their people even as it illustrated the wide gulf between their lifestyle and that of ordinary Syrians.⁵⁹ Referring to his peers' reactions, an intellectual said, "many people felt provoked by the *Vogue* article. The first lady appears like a saint, like a Syrian Eva Peron. She is described as 'a rose in the desert', as a 'beam of light in a country filled with shadows.' What does that say about the rest of us?"⁶⁰

Officials staged crude propaganda ploys designed to display a confident leadership enjoying unconditional popular adulation. On 15 February, after prayers at the historic Omeyyad Mosque in central Damascus, Assad drove his own car through a crowd of adoring citizens. A month later, on 12 March, he and his wife toured the countryside around the southern city of Sweida; in the official narrative, they had made the most of their "holiday" in that part of the country to "spontaneously" visit local farmers and workers "with no bodyguards" – though, somehow, an official photographer was there to record it all.

Such propaganda – in some cases arguably reflecting less a concerted effort than the aggregation of multiple personal initiatives by regime zealots – quickly degenerated into a regressive personality cult. In one speech, a senior Baath party official referred to Bashar as the "father leader" (*al-eb al-qa'ed*), an expression unheard-of since Hafez al-Assad's death. An increasing number of presidential portraits were displayed. Regime cronies driving luxury cars around Damascus repeatedly honked to express support for a regime that has seen a deepening gap between rich and poor.⁶¹ Some went as far as to display pictures of the so-called Trinity – Hafez, Bashar and his eldest son Hafez – thereby suggesting hereditary rule might be perpetuated for generations to come. All this ostentatious pageantry not only irritated ordinary Syrians,

but also convinced them the regime was headed backwards rather than toward a reformist future.

Finally, authorities worked hard to frame regional events within their time-honoured worldview. They hailed the fall of Mubarak as the end of the "Camp David era" – suggesting that the regime's collapse was due to its peace deal with Israel and that it paved the way for a far tougher stance toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁶² More generally, officials described revolutions and uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa as driven primarily by popular rejection of leaders' pro-Western alignment. The regime had Samir Qantar – the Lebanese militant detained by Israel until Hizbollah secured his release following the 2006 war – deliver lectures in Syria in an attempt to rally public opinion. As NATO intervened in Libya in support of the opposition, Damascus sought to revive memories of the colonial era and recent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶³ By progressively shifting from a narrative that emphasised an Arab awakening to one that warned of a foreign conspiracy, the regime was laying the groundwork for its own depiction of domestic protests as part of an external plot.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Syrian Arab News Agency, 21 February 2011.

⁵⁹ Joan Juliet Buck, "Asma al-Assad: A Rose in the Desert", *Vogue*, 25 February 2011.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessman and intellectual, Damascus, 17 March 2011. See also Esther Addley and Katherine Marsh, "Syria's British-born first lady divides the women of Damascus", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2011.

⁶¹ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, February 2011.

⁶² Associated Press, 12 February 2011.

⁶³ Not all Syrians took the bait. Rumours regarding Syrian support for the Libyan regime suggested that many citizens in fact believed that the regime was driven by fear of spreading revolutionary winds to save Colonel Qaddafi's rule. Authorities felt compelled to publish a response to these rumours. "Clarification of the Syrian position towards the ongoing tragic events in Libya", communiqué from the Syrian embassy in London, 14 February 2011.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 10 March 2011.

III. THE PEOPLE'S AWAKENING

Even as the regime was making policy adjustments in hopes of pre-empting a possible crisis, the public was beginning to stir. Well before mid-March and the onset of serious disturbance, the impact of regional turmoil could be felt in the changed behaviour and outlook of ordinary Syrians – a preview of what suddenly would turn into far-reaching unrest.

In a society that long had been depoliticised, casual discussions took on an unfamiliar political tone. Everything the regime said or did came under intense scrutiny. A local journalist remarked:

Until recently, people at best would be talking about events occurring elsewhere in the region. Now they are establishing connections with what is happening to them. Many want change and would be willing to buy into a reformist vision, but they wonder: "Is the regime capable of such a vision?", "Can it mount a revolution against itself?", and "If not, is the status quo tolerable?"⁶⁵

By late February, in the small town of Kaswa, on the outskirts of Damascus, Crisis Group heard people openly evoking the need to put an end to the regime.⁶⁶ Even telephone conversations were remarkably candid.⁶⁷

Slowly, the wall of fear painstakingly erected by the security apparatus was crumbling. An intellectual said, "I have lost this sense of fear. The wall still stands but some blocks have been removed. I now say things I would never have said before".⁶⁸ People also resorted to political humour, trading jokes and puns that targeted what once had been unassailable taboos, playing on their leaders' names. Bashar Assad became Minshar (a saw, suggesting brutality) Assad; Hafez Assad turned into Hafez Fassad (meaning corruption).

Youth, which until then had showed scant interest in politics, was no exception. Another intellectual marvelled at how his teenage relatives in the town of Salamiyé would vent their anger either at the regime in general or at specific security services, even though they were too young to have any grievances of their own.⁶⁹ In early March, a local journalist noted:

On Facebook, you can see Syria's youth awakening before your eyes. They follow everything closely and show an interest in topics they had long ignored. Initially, they spoke about regional events and new concepts, such as democracy. Increasingly, they are refocusing on Syrian affairs, concrete issues – their own destiny. They scrutinise the regime's every move and pre-empt any attempt to play up divisions. Take their slogans for example, such as "no Sunni, no Allawi, no Kurd and no Arab, we all want freedom".⁷⁰

As one possible manifestation of this internet-assisted political remobilisation, membership in an intriguing Facebook page dedicated to the "Syrian revolution" (which later was discovered to have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and thus became a more controversial forum)⁷¹ grew from 25,000 in late February to 40,000 two weeks later.⁷² Internet-based criticism, once predictable and marginal, became far more pointed, sharp and extensive.

Such shifts were neither strictly rhetorical nor virtual. Many Syrians felt compelled to take concrete action, in small yet meaningful ways. Anti-regime slogans – often emulating catchphrases that first appeared in Tunisia and Egypt – became almost ubiquitous in small towns and in the capital's outskirts.⁷³ Some, although unwilling to take personal risks, nonetheless refused to engage in business as usual. A journalist explained why he resigned from his position at a state-controlled daily: "How could I dance when I saw Ben Ali fall and then go back to work as if nothing had happened?"⁷⁴ Another journalist said, "my wife wants to go out and protest, and I have to remind her that we have young children to tend to. Still I must take a stance one way or the other. There is a need for fundamental change and many ways to get that message across".⁷⁵ In a scene witnessed by Crisis Group, an academic who was asked to appear on local television negotiated the terms of the interview, insisting that the exercise would be senseless unless he could speak frankly about corruption.⁷⁶

They are arresting more and more of them, although it doesn't help". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 19 March 2011.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 1 March 2011.

⁷¹ See Syria Comment, op. cit., 24 April 2011.

⁷² Agence France-Presse, 27 February 2011; and 15 March 2011.

⁷³ Crisis Group observations and interviews, February-March 2011.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 14 February 2011.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 8 February 2011.

⁷⁶ The journalist, caught off-guard, replied that he did not have instructions on how to handle the new situation. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 17 February 2011.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 23 February 2011.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group observations, Kaswa, 26 February 2011.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, March 2011.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

⁶⁹ He added that although the youth often had had no prior experience of repression, that was fast changing. "The youth's remobilisation is putting the security services in a state of panic.

A handful of public figures chose to push the limits. A parliamentarian from Aleppo suggested forming a committee to review the emergency law; not one of his colleagues supported the initiative, but the fact that he floated the idea spoke volumes about the emerging new climate.⁷⁷ Likewise, a prominent Sunni religious leader, Rateb Nabulsi, gave a sermon in which he praised the dramatic changes experienced by the region, drawing an unmistakable parallel between Tunisia and Egypt on the one hand and Syria on the other.⁷⁸

Throughout the country, more direct expressions of insubordination surfaced. What not long before had been routine – and unchallenged – forms of bullying and extortion by civil servants met unusual resistance on the part of ordinary citizens, emboldened by regional transformations. A lawyer recounted how a shop-owner, pressured to pay a bribe, publicly insulted employees of Damascus municipality.⁷⁹ An intellectual and mother of two told another revealing story:

I was driving home and took a street that has just been turned into a one-way thoroughfare. I was right behind a luxury car. The policeman let it go through, before stopping me. I told him: “You had better not fine me. You and I are on the same side; it’s that guy who is different. Let me go or I will provoke a huge scandal right here and now”. He panicked and told me to leave.⁸⁰

Syrians also felt mounting frustration at being left on the sidelines of history at a time when much of the region was rising up. Insofar as they tend to think of themselves as being at the vanguard of the Arab world – a self-perception nurtured by the regime itself – many were ashamed by the contrast with their Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Bahraini and Yemenite counterparts.⁸¹ On the internet, Syrians increasingly used derogatory terms to describe themselves, bemoaning their own “weakness” and “cowardice”.⁸²

When added up, these subtle shifts amounted to a radical change in atmosphere. It was as if a million fingers were

poking, probing, prodding the regime, gently but firmly. Although largely invisible to most government officials – and diplomats – the transition was evident to members of the security services, who could see the entire picture and were both distressed and rapidly overwhelmed by it.⁸³ Faced with a society they had long contained and regulated but which suddenly behaved in unfamiliar and unsettling ways, they strove to remain on top of a phenomenon they had no time to comprehend. A local journalist familiar with them shared his assessment before the outbreak of protests turned into all-out confrontation:

The security services are physically exhausted, analytically confused, and practically devoid of appropriate means to respond. They have no clear instructions on how to deal with this, and some feel let down by the leadership. They wonder where are the other institutions that should shoulder part of this challenge. In particular, they question: where is the [Baath] party?⁸⁴

Amid the agitation, blunders were legion. A member of one of the security services recounted one among many alarming incidents:

In a primary school in Damascus, some child wrote “toz” [a slang word used to express disdain and indifference] on Bashar’s portrait [hanging in the classroom]. The teacher called the director, who called the local party chief, who called the head of the Damascus branch, who called National Security, who called us. Instead of telling the teacher to replace the portrait and quietly try to figure out who did it, our guys went in, put all the kids in a row and threatened them. One had a heart condition and began sweating and twitching. So they accused him and he had a stroke. I’m not sure the child survived.⁸⁵

Security services focused on preventing or, if need be, dispersing public gatherings. On 2 February, civil society activists organised a vigil in support of the Egyptian revolution, in front of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus. Plainclothes security agents were deployed nearby, ready to intervene – though in this case the threat itself proved dissuasive. Demonstrators renewed their attempt soon thereafter in the Christian neighbourhood of Bab Toma; this time, participants were roughed up.

On 16 February, when a policeman slighted a vendor in the commercial neighbourhood of Hariqa, in the capital’s old city, the surrounding streets filled in a matter of minutes with crowds chanting “the Syrian people will not be

⁷⁷ See Phil Sands, “Syrian MP calls for review of harsh emergency laws”, *The National*, 11 March 2011.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 25 February 2011.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 March 2011.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2011.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February-March 2011. Syrian residents of a Palestinian refugee camp bitterly told a visiting Tunisian friend: “You Tunisians are brave, unlike us cowards”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 March 2011.

⁸² A Syrian lawyer said, “Syrians are insulting each other over the internet. One emblematic comment I read was: ‘We Syrians are mosquitoes, and the regime has every reason to treat us as such’”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 March 2011.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February-March 2011.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 22 March 2011.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 March 2011.

humiliated".⁸⁶ The interior minister drove to the site and personally punished the offender, prompting the people to change tunes and sing Assad's praise. The incident illustrated how volatile the mood on the street had become. It also suggested how critical the regime's response would be: had the police shot at the protesters in the historical heart of Damascus, the uprising could have started then and there.

At a 23 February vigil on behalf of the Libyan people, a small number of middle- and upper-class youngsters appeared as inexperienced at carrying out the demonstration as the security services were at containing them. Several protesters were arrested; some among them later testified that they had been treated with a mix of intimidation and cajoling. Although the objective was to keep them off the streets, in fact this only spurred them on.⁸⁷ For a while, such ambiguous behaviour on the part of security officers became the norm. Palestinians organising a sit-in in favour of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah claimed that they had been detained, treated respectfully and lectured: "It's your right, but this really isn't the moment. We just can't afford to allow any gathering whatsoever".⁸⁸

By mid-March, protests appeared poised to spread to the heart of Damascus. On the 15th, youth groups organised a small yet energetic demonstration in the central market of Hamidiya. For the first time, footage recorded by participants on their mobile telephones was aired on satellite news channels virtually in real time. In shops and homes, viewers were shocked and unsure how to react at seeing this unprecedented image of their own country.⁸⁹ A local journalist who was walking across town while Al Jazeera broadcast the event said, "in every coffee-shop people are watching the pictures, mesmerised. No protest in Syria had ever appeared on mainstream television".⁹⁰ Security forces harshly dispersed the protesters.

The following day, relatives of the country's numerous political detainees gathered before the interior ministry. Emulating a tactic that had been refined in Tunisia and Egypt, some participants used Twitter to spread live reports on the event and circulate instructions to fellow protesters. Although small in size, peaceful in nature and legitimate in its demands for greater respect for the rule of law, the protest triggered a severe regime response that was an omen of things to come. Security forces beat and

arrested demonstrators, including women and at least one ten-year old child.⁹¹ Thuggish loyalists mounted a counter-demonstration designed to further intimidate the crowd. Authorities claimed that the ministry was about to receive the families but that "*agents provocateurs*" had mingled with them for the purpose of inflaming the situation and that "shopkeepers and citizens" had attacked them to restore order.⁹² Contradicting that narrative, however, a court charged 33 individuals – for the most part relatives of the detainees – with "weakening national morale and compromising the state".⁹³

When on 18 March, Friday prayers at the Omeyyad Mosque grew into anti-regime chants and were met with brutal force by the security services, it was clear small-scale forms of mobilisation were turning into a more generalised pattern. Increasing numbers of Syrians were galvanised by the regime's repression. Some were encouraged by the still bearable level of state violence: if a little beating was the price to pay for expressing frustration, they deemed it worthwhile.⁹⁴ Others were incensed by the authorities' response; a largely unknown civil society figure such as Souheir Atassi suddenly became a symbol, when security forces allegedly dragged her by the hair during the crackdown. The events were recorded by the protesters' numerous mobile phones, extinguishing any hope participants might have had that they could remain anonymous. That they nonetheless continued protesting demonstrated a high level of commitment and suggested the phenomenon was far from a passing fad; in turn, the exposure gained through the recordings helped the movement maintain and gain momentum.

At that time, there was neither evidence nor indication that this growing rebelliousness was anything but a spontaneous and fully indigenous affair. Plans emanating from abroad, such as the early February call for a "Day of Anger", failed miserably when compared to home-grown initiatives.⁹⁵ If anything, the initial demonstrations reflected the slow remobilisation of small segments of the capital's middle class, whose lack of prior protest experience was evidenced by the uncoordinated and tentative nature of their efforts. Soon, however, the regime's gross mishandling of a localised crisis in the southern city of Deraa would shift the focus away from the capital toward the provinces.

⁸⁶ A senior security official estimated the number of protesters at over 5,000. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 17 February 2011.

⁸⁷ See Rania Abouzeid, "The Syrian Style of Repression: Thugs and Lectures", *Time*, 27 February 2011.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 March 2011.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group observations, Damascus, 15 March 2011.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 March 2011.

⁹¹ See Reuters, 16 March 2011; and *The New York Times*, 16 March 2011.

⁹² See Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 March 2011.

⁹³ See Reuters, 18 March 2011.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, March 2011.

⁹⁵ See Phil Sands, "Syria's 'Day of Anger' failed to ignite as protesters stay away", *The National*, 8 February 2011.

IV. A LEGACY OF NEGLECT

A critical turning point occurred on 18 March 2011. That day, in both the Mediterranean coastal city of Banyas and the southern city of Deraa, crowds took to the streets to express local grievances. Residents of Banyas, a town renowned for its Sunni conservative outlook, took aim at regime measures that discriminated against female employees of the education ministry wearing a *niqab* (full-face veil). In Deraa, resentment focused on a number of officials who were seen as particularly incompetent, brutal or corrupt. Protesters simultaneously aired various other complaints suggesting that dissatisfaction ran much deeper.

Although there are significant differences between the provinces, and each possesses its own sources of anger, most have in common a profound sense of distress, which explains why demonstrations gradually spread to a majority of towns across the country. In Duma, just north of the capital, the precipitating factors were a tightly-knit conservative society, strong local identity and history of rebelliousness, combined with the harmful effects of economic liberalisation on the manufacturing trade. In other cities, the uprising was shaped by a variety of other ingredients: age-old grievances; recent cases of abuse by security services; growing religiousness; the drought's devastating impact on the agricultural sector; the role of powerful smuggling networks; or persistent communal fault lines that fuelled sectarianism. What they all shared, however, was deep fatigue and frustration which gradually transformed disparate, disjointed and localised flashpoints into a national protest movement.

The primary catalyst in this process, as will be further described in a companion report, was the regime's response. For weeks, it treated each and every instance of unrest as an isolated case, employing a mix of perfunctory negotiations, minor concessions and brutal repression. This approach produced a familiar cycle whereby the security forces' escalation and street radicalisation reinforced one another and led residents of other localities to rise up in solidarity with victims of state repression.

Most often, the demonstrations involved small numbers, the hard core of the protest movement being drawn chiefly from underprivileged youth, who had little to lose. But the security forces' excessive use of force against them and resulting bloodshed inevitably broadened the protest movement's social base, as relatives, friends, colleagues and other citizens outraged by the regime's conduct joined in. Meanwhile, slogans morphed from specific, concrete demands into a general call to topple the regime. Friday prayers became a natural rallying point for a predominantly conservative, working-class and unorganised pool of protesters; exiting the mosques *en masse* took

care of logistical issues while providing this slow-motion revolution a predictable, weekly rhythm.

Popular mobilisation in the capital stalled as the protest movement extended to the provinces. There was a reason for this. In central Damascus, a population largely composed of minorities,⁹⁶ secular city dwellers, the state-employed middle class and old Damascene families was troubled by the turn of events. Some feared the fundamentalist or sectarian undercurrents of the protests in several regions.⁹⁷ Others were loath to see a provincial underclass reassert itself and thus potentially threaten their interests within a well-established social hierarchy.⁹⁸ Enduring instability, heightened levels of violence and the regime's claim that demonstrators looted private property and were motivated by sectarian concerns, as well as the overall lack of reliable information, plunged a large number of Damascenes into a state of confusion and anxiety.⁹⁹ Accordingly, many residents of the capital took the view that the regime should be afforded time to reform, the alternative being a perilous, chaotic and potentially destructive uprising.

The ensuing calm that prevailed in the capital encouraged the regime to continue dealing with the protest movement as if it were merely a series of isolated and transient difficulties rather than the manifestation of a deep national crisis – the legacy of the authorities' systematic neglect and mismanagement of domestic problems.

⁹⁶ As of the 1960s, members of minority groups – notably Christians, Druze, Shiites and Allawites – were drawn to Damascus by the prospect of state employment. See Cyril Rousset, "Communauté et mobilité: les 'nouveaux refuges' des Druzes de Syrie", in *Les Migrations internationales. Observation, analyse et perspectives*, Publication des Actes du colloque de Budapest, 2004; Fabrice Balanche, "Alaouites: une secte au pouvoir", *Outre Terre*, vol. 2, no. 14, 2006.

⁹⁷ "The absence of civil society gave the protests an Islamist tonality that weakened its appeal. People don't want to go through yet another Islamic insurgency". Crisis Group telephone interview, Syrian businessman, Damascus, 28 March 2011. A local journalist explained this Islamist undercurrent: "Other than the mosque, Facebook is the only space where Syrians can meet. None of my friends – most of whom are hostile to the regime and quite militant – have gone out to demonstrate. That is because mosques cannot be a rallying point for a Westernised civil society". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 6 April 2011.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, March-April-May 2011.

⁹⁹ Peter Harling, "Syria's Race against the Clock", foreignpolicy.com, 11 April 2011.

A. THE CASE OF DERA'A

Social tensions had been building in Dera'a for some time. This administrative centre, the largest city in the agricultural plain of Hawran, is bordered by the Israeli-occupied Golan plateau to the west, the Jordanian frontier to the south, the Druze mountains and the desert to the east and Damascus to the north. Historically, the area had once been considered a pillar of the regime in general and of the Baath party in particular;¹⁰⁰ it is the birthplace of numerous lower-ranking officials in addition to several prominent figures – among them Vice President Farouk Sharaa, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Faysal Muqdad and the former head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, Rostom Ghazale.

The economy depends on three sources of revenue: agricultural production (which traditionally has been bought and sold by merchants from Meidan, an old Damascus neighbourhood); transit trade with Jordan (which provides employment for taxi and truck drivers and business for various shops and restaurants, as well as smuggling opportunities); and migrant work in Lebanon. Recent years have seen living standards plummet as two of these dried up. While the political crisis between Damascus and Beirut cost many Syrians their construction or seasonal jobs in Lebanon,¹⁰¹ the depletion of water resources – resulting from both lack of rainfall and wasteful management – significantly hurt the agricultural sector. Some local businessmen turned to the poultry sector instead, building large chicken farms; for the most part, however, these employed cheap Kurdish labour from the north east.¹⁰² As the area slid into poverty, its youth sat idle and religious fundamentalism rose.¹⁰³

Throughout, the regime paid scant attention to the alarming socio-economic predicament. For the most part, its presence took the shape of corrupt and incompetent civilian officials, equally rapacious members of the security forces and a rather provocative military camp staffed with Allawite officers and their families, whose secular demeanour was in stark contrast with the increasingly religiously conservative environment. Taking advantage of a 2008 decree that subjected land sales in cities close to border areas to their approval, security officials ran a large-scale extortion scheme.¹⁰⁴ The Baath party was but a shadow of its former self. In 2007, the head of the party section in a town adjacent to Dera'a complained:

We hardly run activities in any field and we don't have the budget to try. We can't even reach out to the youth by offering minimal sports facilities. It's hard enough just to convene the section's internal meetings. Some "active members" on our lists are flabbergasted when we tell them that they are.¹⁰⁵

In a rural setting like the Hawran plain, the Baath's retreat left peasants to their own devices, as the availability of party-supplied services (such as cheap fertilisers) declined. More broadly, Hawran's fate symbolised the party's disengagement from most of its traditional social roles. A Baath-affiliated journalist explained: "The Baath is absent when it comes to most important issues such as the rural exodus, matters involving the youth, the status of women, growing prostitution and so forth. Its deficiencies have opened the door to other forms of social organisation, notably of a religious nature".¹⁰⁶ Kinship bonds also were reinvigorated.

The revolutionary winds blowing from Tunisia and Egypt quickly swept across an increasingly barren Hawran. During a visit to the area just days before protests broke out, Crisis Group witnessed a tense climate. Anti-regime slo-

¹⁰⁰ Between 1966 and 1970, Baath Party Command members hailed mostly from Latakia (29.7 per cent), Hawran (20.3 per cent) and Dayr Zor (15.6 per cent). Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (London, 1996).

¹⁰¹ A local official in a small town of over 10,000 inhabitants said, "before our troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, many youths worked over there, mostly in agriculture and building but also in trade. Three or four buses used to make the cross-border trip daily. Now these people just sit idly in the streets. Criminality has gone up". Crisis Group interview, November 2007.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, local official, town adjacent to Dera'a, November 2007.

¹⁰³ An expert on Syrian Islamism described Hawran as one of several rural and semi-rural areas that have been exposed to the spread of Salafism as of the 1990s. Arnaud Lenfant, "L'évolution du salafisme dans la Syrie contemporaine", in Bernard Rougier, *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme* (Paris, 2008). Hawran reportedly was one of the targets of the October 2009 crackdown against Salafi jihadist networks led by Hafez Mak-

hlouf, Bashar's cousin. Crisis Group interview, Syrian security official, Damascus, October 2009. Northern Jordan is known for its strong Salafi presence; it might well have influenced neighbouring Hawran through family and business connections.

¹⁰⁴ "One of the grievances in Dera'a concerned construction. To build, people need a security clearance, which can take up to two years and cost a lot of money". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 7 April 2011. For details on this decree, which has had an impact on other parts of the country – notably the Hassaka governorate – see Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo, "Ten years of Bashar al-Asad and No Compromise with the Kurds", *Syrian Studies Association Newsletter*, vol.16, no. 1, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, November 2007. The party daily, *al-Baath*, sold on a monthly basis a mere 300 copies (excluding subscriptions by local institutions). Crisis Group interview, senior Baath party official, Damascus, 3 May 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 April 2009.

gangs painted on the walls had become so rampant that to purchase spray cans one had to show identification. Authorities recorded Friday prayers delivered in all mosques so that intelligence services could review them if necessary. Local residents warned of an explosive situation; any spark might cause it to detonate.¹⁰⁷ The arrest, detention and ill-treatment of a group of children calling – most likely in jest – for the regime's demise did just that.¹⁰⁸

The demonstrations, which initially involved the children's relatives and called for their release, quickly expanded in both their composition and demands; they soon expressed the depth and breadth of years of pent-up frustration. The list of demands reflected the many facets of the region's social distress: removing the governor and head of security; taking steps to address local economic issues; and getting rid of Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, a business mogul who, in the eyes of many, epitomised corruption and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few.¹⁰⁹ But Deraa told a broader story still.

B. THE PROVINCES' REVENGE

At its core, the protest movement is a revolt against poor governance in provinces that the regime has long left adrift. Other phenomena, which authorities make every effort to highlight, either derived from this dynamic or latched onto it: the spread of fundamentalism above all results from economic destitution and social neglect; well-armed criminal gangs and smuggling networks more often than not worked hand-in-hand with the security services; and, while some of the regime's longstanding foreign enemies almost certainly sought to exploit the situation, their impact would have been as limited as in recent years were it not for the outbreak of a spontaneous, home-grown uprising.

Ironically, the regime grew out of the very same provinces that today are rebelling against it. In the 1950s and 1960s, the peasantry and provincial petty bourgeoisie saw

in the military and Baath party instruments of social promotion. Hailing from marginal areas such as Hawran, the Mediterranean coast or Dayr Zor, they ultimately turned the tables against a quasi-feudal elite – mostly Sunni, but also in some instances Allawite¹¹⁰ – that monopolised political power, land ownership, financial capital and religious legitimacy. With the 1963 coup d'état, the central seat of power was conquered by the periphery.¹¹¹

Even though the change involved a military takeover, it led to a social revolution that, in turn, helped redistribute power and resources more equitably. The incoming elites extended the state's presence to the countryside.¹¹² In the 1960s and 1970s, the state stretched its reach to regions that had experienced little save for exploitation by absentee landowners: it built roads and schools, provided electricity and healthcare, boosted local administrations and established structures to facilitate and fund development projects. Members of the working class found employment in the growing bureaucracy; although wages were low, they benefited from job security and other social services.

The (mostly Sunni) leading families, which were based in the largest cities – Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs and Latakia – paid an economic price. The regime implemented a program of agrarian reform, including land expropriations, and nationalisation that hit business owners hard. At the same time, it issued tough regulations, as a result of which the trade sector became almost entirely dependent on the state. A lawyer and intellectual said:

Broadly speaking, the regime curtailed all trade. Laws passed in the early 70s restricted imports and banned foreign currency transfers. In a country that hardly produces anything, the regime thus became an indispensable partner for anyone seeking to import goods. Businessmen who cherished their independence left the country, making room for the enrichment of an Allawite political elite which, in turn, partnered with those elements of the Sunni business class that accepted the new rules of the game.¹¹³

Aleppo, for centuries the nation's most prominent trading hub, was particularly affected, as Damascus took centre

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Hawran, 4-5 March 2011. For an excellent snapshot of the situation in a Hawrani village on the eve of the Deraa protests, see Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "In Syria's parched farmlands: echoes of Egyptian woes", Reuters, 10 March 2011.

¹⁰⁸ A group of over ten children, the eldest of whom was fifteen years old, reportedly was detained and treated harshly for writing on a wall or singing "the people want to topple the regime". As efforts to ensure their release failed, their families finally took to the streets and apparently were promptly shot at.

¹⁰⁹ Tellingly, anti-Makhlouf slogans were among the very first to be aired, even before casualties were reported. See "Demonstrators, police clash in south Syria city", Reuters, 18 March 2011.

¹¹⁰ Fabrice Balanche, "Alaouites", op. cit.

¹¹¹ See Alasdair Drysdale, "Center and Periphery in Syria:", op. cit.; Alasdair Drysdale, "The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (January 1981).

¹¹² See, for instance, Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (Paris, Karthala, 2006).

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, business lawyer, Damascus, September 2009.

stage.¹¹⁴ To consolidate his hold over the capital, Hafez Assad nurtured an alliance with Damascene merchants. The arrangement proved remarkably resilient in the 1980s, when the Muslim Brotherhood, entrenched in cities such as Hama, Homs and Aleppo that had lost much to the emerging elite, rose up to challenge the new order. A businessman and regime insider commented: "Damascus has been very loyal, especially during the struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood. The traditional business community in the capital never so much as went on strike, unlike its counterparts elsewhere. It has prospered under this regime".¹¹⁵

If minorities were strongly represented in the regime, Sunnis from areas that had long suffered from the dominance of a feudal elite also featured prominently.¹¹⁶

Over the years, the regime forgot its social roots, increasingly distancing itself from the peripheral areas from which it came.¹¹⁷ The state's presence in those regions declined, first as a result of the 1980s economic crisis, next due to the subsequent efforts at economic liberalisation.¹¹⁸ The gap between the capital city and other parts of the country grew dramatically after Bashar took over from his father in 2000. His presidency heralded the emergence of a new generation that, unlike its predecessors, had grown up in Damascus, inherited power rather than fought for it,¹¹⁹ adopted the ways, views and values of the urban elite and showed scant interest in or respect for the provinces.

This generational transition deeply transformed the regime. The Baath party and related organisations that once served as a bond between the regime and its social bases

decayed.¹²⁰ Local administrative bodies, rather than addressing popular needs, became the embodiment of a predatory culture in which resources were not redistributed but skimmed off for the benefit of the few. Among governors, blatant corruption and incompetence were the norm. As a Syrian official said, "governors are corrupt almost as a professional requirement. It is part and parcel of the system. The leadership assumes that loyalty requires involvement in a system of graft".¹²¹ In many ways, the state seemed to abdicate all responsibility. Thus, when the plundering of underground water reserves combined with several years of drought recently turned the north east into a virtual dustbowl, displacing hundreds of thousands, the regime's response essentially was to try to curb the flow of internal refugees and conceal the magnitude of the disaster by denying media access (see below).¹²²

In the countryside, the security services assumed an increasingly central role. Far from containing what were fast accumulating problems, they often directly contributed to them. Not only did the depletion of water resources occur on their watch, but they also took bribes linked to endemic illegal drilling. Well-armed smuggling networks prospered under their protection in places like Deraa, Madaya, Homs, Telkalakh and Idlib; in 2011, when the security forces cracked down on the protests, they paid the price as they faced violent resistance. More broadly, criminals enjoyed far greater manoeuvring room than would be expected in a police state; in June, Bashar expressed astonishment at the fact that some 64,000 wanted individuals were roaming around the country. The security forces' laxness extended to their attitude toward fundamentalist militants, who were alternatively arrested, ignored or co-opted (see below).

2000 also was a turning point in terms of economic policy. Assad quickly moved to reverse a legacy of agrarian reform, eliminating state-owned farms and allowing private investors to reconstitute vast properties dedicated to

¹¹⁴ See Myriam Ababsa et al., "Le territoire syrien entre intégration nationale et métropolisation renforcée", in Baudouin Dupret (ed.), *La Syrie au présent*, (Paris, 2007).

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, businessman and regime insider, Damascus, June 2009.

¹¹⁶ They included the defence minister, Mustafa Tlass, who came from Rastan near Homs; Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam, who came from the coastal town of Banyas; Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa, from Deraa; and the secretary general of the Baath party's national command, Abdallah Ahmar, from Tell, a town close to Damascus. None of these towns had ever enjoyed any such representation within the state.

¹¹⁷ Tellingly, when unrest swept across Sunni provincial towns and cities in 2011, none of the Sunni heavyweights within the power apparatus enjoyed any credibility or legitimacy on the streets.

¹¹⁸ See Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite*, op. cit.

¹¹⁹ "The previous generation had genuine militant and political experience. This one, for the most part, comprises little more than children who grew up never hearing anyone tell them no". Crisis Group interview, regime insider, 5 April 2011.

¹²⁰ "The peasantry was the party's historical base, which it cultivated by providing services related to agriculture and fair representation within the power structure. But the Baath has since withdrawn from day-to-day activities and is now dominated by a generation that is of urban, not rural extraction, and shows little interest in the countryside". Crisis Group interview, Syrian intellectual, Damascus, 15 October 2009.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 6 April 2011. "The new governor of Raqqa, for instance, was renowned for his corruption in Aleppo. Even the media reported on his wrongdoing. What makes him so indispensable?" Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, January 2010.

¹²² "The state is proving to be incapable of responding. It is a structural problem. In recent years, to what end has the state spent money other than to sustain itself?". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 23 November 2009.

intensive farming – one of the factors behind the depletion of water resources. The government gradually lifted trade restrictions and opened up the domestic market to competition. As the supply of state-subsidised goods and services declined, the private sector was encouraged to take over.

The government accelerated the liberalisation drive after 2005, as Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon decoupled the two neighbours' economies. Previously, there had been a division of labour, whereby free-market Lebanon provided socialist Syria with much that was lacking in Damascus, including modern banking and insurance services, access to international markets and management skills, quality food processing and entertainment. Lebanon thus channelled much of Syria's private capital while absorbing its excess labour and, as a result of smuggling, a large quantity of cheap goods (notably subsidised agricultural and petroleum products). The 2005 crisis significantly altered the relationship, as Damascus was compelled to modernise its economy, and capital that traditionally had been invested in or via Lebanon was repatriated to Syria.

One consequence was that elite consumption habits and high-level corruption – both of which largely had played out in Lebanon – relocated to Damascus. In a country that long sought to project a sense of egalitarianism, the privileged class now unabashedly exhibited its affluence, highlighting the gap between rich and poor. Personal enrichment became ostentatious and corruption free-wheeling.¹²³ An insider described the new culture within the ruling elite:

The current mix of business and politics is unprecedented. It has gone way beyond what Hafez used to tolerate. There are a handful of individuals working in the presidential palace to whom you need to go in order to engage in the most minute forms of business, let alone major projects. Just to get small things done, you have to say "I work for so and so" or "this matter is of concern to so and so". I constantly am amazed at the kinds of questions to which these officials devote their time when they theoretically should be taking care of our national interests and security. They grill me concerning elections to this or that chamber of commerce or focus on their rivalry with the son of a given official. If such issues are on their minds, it's clear they're not doing what they ought to be doing.¹²⁴

¹²³ "In the past, corrupt individuals stood out somewhat. Now they are the norm". Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, April 2009.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman and regime insider, Damascus, 18 April 2010. He added: "Why isn't the

Much of the business that was undertaken in this fashion was irrelevant to the national economy, he lamented; instead, it amounted to confiscating the nation's wealth: "All these people who make money off the state to some extent do so illegally. They don't pay taxes or reinvest in Syria, if for no other reason than they don't want to reveal how much business they do; instead, they place their profits in off-shore accounts. The money is siphoned off. It hardly ever trickles down to the people".¹²⁵

Even legal activities have had little grassroots impact. The country's two major holding companies, in which its most prosperous businessmen participate and which are endowed with huge amounts of capital, reportedly have developed few projects within Syria itself.¹²⁶ The domestic private sector, whose growth many hoped would compensate for a downsized bureaucracy, offers salaries as unappealing as its public counterpart and without either job security or social benefits. The combination of corruption and economic liberalisation has fostered a business class that by and large is indebted to – and dependent on – Bashar; although some industries have suffered from free market policies, merchants have done well, and many companies have prospered in an environment shaped by crony capitalism. Unsurprisingly, the private sector took the lead in orchestrating a gaudy celebration full of sycophantic pageantry in 2007, when Assad won a second seven-year term by plebiscite. A sign of the times, the Baath party, by contrast, was virtually invisible.

In some areas, the liberalisation drive generated a sense of progress. Most notably, Damascus morphed from the dull and destitute town it was in the 1990s into a bustling city, replete with private banks, insurance companies, luxury shops, Western-style malls, trendy cafes and high-end restaurants. For the privileged, there was no sense of stagnation, let alone regression. A wealthy lawyer stressed how enjoyable life had become in the space of a decade: "Things have changed since the mid-1990s. Politically, the regime relaxed its pressure. Economically, the country opened up. Both of these had an impact on the quality of life. At last, it became possible for people like me to get on with their lives".¹²⁷ A similar dynamic took hold in Aleppo, an outgrowth of improved relations with the regime (see below), the revival of local industry and

president doing anything about it? That's the question on everybody's lips".

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman and regime insider, Damascus, 18 April 2010.

¹²⁶ *The Economist*, 25 February 2008. In early 2010, the Suria Holding company was working on only four projects in Syria. Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman and member of the holding company, Damascus, February 2010.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Syrian lawyer and intellectual, Damascus, 20 October 2007.

growing ties to neighbouring Turkey, as well as overall modernisation.

But virtually everywhere else the quality of basic services declined dramatically. Salaries all but stagnated while the cost of living increased steeply, if only because various subsidies were removed. Cheap, imported goods wreaked havoc on small manufacturers, notably in working-class towns surrounding Damascus. In rural areas, hardship caused by economic changes was compounded by the drought, particularly in the north east, the south and the central countryside around Salamiya. Over the years, neglect and pauperisation of the countryside prompted an exodus of underprivileged Syrians to rare hubs of economic activity. Cities such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs saw the development of sprawling suburbs that absorbed rural migrants but often were devoid of adequate services and amenities. Members of the state-employed middle class, caught between, on the one hand, low salaries, shrinking subsidies and services and, on the other, rising expenses, were pushed out of the city centre toward the capital's underdeveloped outskirts.¹²⁸

In most places, poverty, criminality and Islamic fundamentalism were on the rise. However, the protest movement cannot be reduced – as the regime would have it – to an illiterate and fanatical youth with which any rational dialogue would prove elusive. In fact, even as virtually all other services declined, the state continued to make available free higher education, which explains why, despite the presence of some thugs among the protesters, the demonstrations by and large have been shaped by creative, sophisticated if underemployed young people.

By the end of Assad's first decade in power, some of the more insightful Syrian observers correctly diagnosed the country's alarming socio-economic conditions. At the time, a journalist said:

The country is about to explode. The cost of living is increasing dramatically; the economy has opened up so fast, and the people have been left behind. State institutions are ever more dysfunctional. The state-employed middle class, which constituted one of Syria's strengths, has been devastated. Hardly anything has been done to attract genuine investments. Meanwhile, we are creating more poverty.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ “The middle class virtually has disappeared. What you have are three categories. A small minority of people who amass fortunes; those in government who are in a position to make some money on the side; and the growing masses of the poor”. Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman enjoying family ties to the leadership, Damascus, 8 February 2010.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, January 2010.

A regime insider put it more starkly still: “On the foreign policy front, we are doing fine. But domestically, there is no other word: it's a tragedy”.¹³⁰

Since the beginning of the uprising, the regime has pointed to the protesters' conservative and, at times, sectarian outlook in an attempt to draw parallels with the Muslim Brotherhood-led insurgency it fought 30 years ago. The analogy is wholly misguided. The Brotherhood's natural social base – the urban elites of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo – has not been among the most eager to join. The neighbourhoods of Kafar Susa and Meidan were rare exceptions in the capital;¹³¹ unrest in Homs began in the periphery and only gradually spread inwards; Hama held off until demonstrations had spread to nearly everywhere else; and, until very recently, Aleppo appeared almost inert. Instead, and at its core, the protest movement has pitted the regime against its own original social base, which initially embraced the Baath party's social vision and only of late has adopted a more conservative outlook. For the most part, the Islamism found among the protesters does not appear to be based on a particular political outlook or project – making it all the more difficult for the regime to deal with.

In this sense, the regime faces a very different challenge from the one it confronted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when an organised Muslim Brotherhood movement rose up. In the words of a senior official:

The protesters essentially are people who resent having been treated like second-class citizens. They want genuine development. They want to own their land, rather than see Gulf investors buy it up. Many see this as a revolution of the youth. I see it as the revolution of their fathers: they are the ones taking pride in their sons and pushing them to accomplish what they themselves failed to achieve.¹³²

Another official concurred:

People are rising up because they want a say in their lives after having been led by an elite that paid no attention to them – despised them, even. They paid the price for liberal economic policies that cost them dearly and that they had no word in designing. Instinc-

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman and regime insider, Damascus, 18 April 2010.

¹³¹ To a large extent, Kafar Susa can be considered a modern extension of the historical neighbourhood of Meidan, whose tightly-knit and conservative society has incorporated many migrants from Hawran. Meidan progressively became a rallying point for protesters from the neighbourhoods of Shaghur and Bab Sarija, who shared a similar background.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

tively at least, they feel that democracy would give them a voice.¹³³

C. ALIENATED CONSTITUENCIES

Given their history, many other constituencies could have been expected to take the lead in the uprising. They did not, choosing instead to follow others. These include traditional Sunni elites, the downtrodden Kurdish minority and Arab inhabitants of the impoverished north east, as well as the longstanding – and long neglected – displaced from the Israeli-occupied Golan.

1. The traditional Sunni elites

The calm that generally has prevailed in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and a source of dissent and strife in the 1970s and 1980s, arguably is one of the protest movement's more intriguing features.¹³⁴ The brutal repression, three decades ago, of the Muslim Brotherhood left deep wounds, and relations with the regime long remained sour. A local journalist said, "the regime targeted the city's religious establishment and discriminated against its business community. A statue of Hafez would not last very long, and it was hard to come across a single Allawite resident. Things began to change at Bashar's behest, when he assumed a more prominent role in the aftermath of the death of [his elder brother and his father's heir-apparent, killed in a car crash] Basil".¹³⁵

Bashar tried hard to reconcile with the people of Aleppo. Unlike his father, who completely snubbed the city, he made frequent visits to a secondary residency established there,¹³⁶ showed ostensible interest in local cuisine and, once he became president, invited distinguished guests to the city. He promoted many figures from Aleppo, most prominently Ahmad Hassun, the mufti for Syria, and Prime Minister Naji Otri.

Although some industries suffered from Bashar's economic liberalisation policies, the city's dynamic entrepre-

neurial class by and large witnessed a revival. By attracting significant foreign investment¹³⁷ and developing close ties to neighbouring Turkey, Aleppo witnessed a dramatic modernisation. Importantly, this process benefited the youth, among others. Far more than in the case of Damascus – presumably because the capital had never represented a threat – the regime also paid close attention to the city's outskirts, which comprised Kurds and Arab migrants from the north east and was perceived as a tinderbox of poverty-driven religious fundamentalism.¹³⁸

Aleppo is a rare part of the country where, prior to the outbreak of protests, Assad took serious measures to preempt the risk of unrest. In February 2011, he reportedly made several visits to the city, ordering that the most unpopular and corrupt officials be purged.¹³⁹ These early moves, which built on pre-existing efforts to normalise relations with the city, may have helped keep discontent in check. Other contributing factors include the strong presence in and around Aleppo of Christian constituencies who on the whole value the regime's secularism, as well as Kurds, who, fearing all-out confrontation, have tended to show restraint (see below). Finally, and unlike Damascus, the city is both largely self-contained and far from the initial flashpoint areas; as a result, its residents hardly were exposed to first-hand accounts of events and were tempted to dismiss media reports as exaggerated if not fabricated.

Only in June, with the extension of the protest movement and ensuing repression to nearby areas – notably the governorate of Idlib – did realities come closer to home, pushing refugees into Aleppo and prompting protests that began in the more conservative neighbourhoods.¹⁴⁰ The looming impact of economic recession appears to have been another factor.¹⁴¹ There is a prospect that escalating arrests among students soon might well trigger broader demonstrations in middle-class areas too.

The central city of Hama had every motive to rise up and serious reasons not to. As the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion, its old town was shelled and levelled in 1982; many women were raped, and much of the youth

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 May 2011.

¹³⁴ A first, small student demonstration reportedly took place on 13 April. Toward the end of the month, minor middle class protests were reported in central Aleppo. They were easily dispersed. See Syria Comment, op. cit., 28 April 2011. Student protests slowly gained momentum in May.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 25 February 2009. See also Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I)*, op. cit.

¹³⁶ Bashar became close friends with the young Iyad Ghazzal, son of a prominent figure who worked at the presidency and who managed the Aleppo residence. Bashar later promoted him to the position of head of Aleppo's railways and governor of Homs.

¹³⁷ See Myriam Ababsa et al., "Le territoire syrien", op. cit.

¹³⁸ "Bashar always has Aleppo on his radar screen, not least because of all the neighbouring poor villages that have never enjoyed state services and are extremely vulnerable to an Islamist worldview". Crisis Group, businessman and regime insider, Damascus, June 2009.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Syria Comment, op. cit., 10 June 2011. See also, "Syrian troops swoop amid Aleppo protests", Agence France-Presse, 30 June 2011.

¹⁴¹ See Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, "Aleppo: Syria's sleeping giant stirs", Al Jazeera, 23 June 2011.

was summarily executed.¹⁴² Since that time, the regime has made virtually no effort at reconciliation, which has meant that the tragedy continues to shape local feelings. An intellectual presciently remarked several years ago: "The events are still taboo. No one mentions them, neither in Hama nor within the regime. But no one has forgotten. They are waiting and know there will be a second round".¹⁴³

However, that same defining experience probably explains why residents held back until the regime's repression in neighbouring Homs climaxed, in May.¹⁴⁴ The regime itself may have sought to prevent an escalation in Hama, doing more to rein in its security services.¹⁴⁵ Other possible explanations include the fact that the governor reportedly strongly opposed a crackdown as well as the relatively homogenous composition of the city which, in contrast to Homs, limited risks of sectarian provocation.¹⁴⁶ Finally, the Muslim Brotherhood – whose current leader hails from Hama – may simply have decided to wait until the timing was right.¹⁴⁷

Further south, Homs joined the protest movement practically from the outset. This came as a surprise given the city's privileged status in recent years. Both Bashar and his brother Maher married into families originally from Homs (the Akhras and the Jadaan), and the president's choice as governor was a highly energetic personal friend, Iyad Ghazzal. The regime selected the city to launch several pilot projects; the goal appeared to be to turn Homs into an administrative centre to relieve some of the pressure exerted on Damascus. Most importantly, the regime made Homs a hub connecting the country's north-south axis to the coast and to the north east – this at the expense

of two cities that would have been more natural candidates, Hama and Aleppo.¹⁴⁸ Although Homs historically fell within Hama's sphere of influence, Bashar turned that traditional hierarchy on its head. The former grew – becoming the third biggest city in the country – even as the latter stagnated.¹⁴⁹

But this was not enough. Homs had become a miniature Syria, a microcosm of its numerous problems. Its economic dynamism benefited only a narrow circle of people, beginning with Rami Makhlouf's local equivalent, Tarif Akhras. The swelling number of migrants who lived in the city's outskirts suffered from declining services and living standards. The security services, predominantly controlled by and staffed with Allawites, earned a particularly bad reputation. If the picture appeared reasonably positive to one who visited the centre of the city, for most of its underprivileged residents it was appalling.¹⁵⁰ Accordingly, when protests first erupted, they began in peripheral neighbourhoods and only gradually spread inward, chiefly as a result of excessive and indiscriminate repression.¹⁵¹ Even then, Christian and Allawite neighbourhoods reportedly remained quiet, likely in reaction to the sectarian tendencies they detected (and feared) within the protest movement.¹⁵²

Ultimately, Bashar's rule proved relatively advantageous to traditional Sunni elites. Besides economic decisions that opened up space for private business, his policies were far less discriminatory than had been his father's. Whereas Hafez's entourage included Sunnis from small provincial towns such as Deraa, Tell, Rastan and Tartus, Bashar co-opted Sunnis from prominent Damascene families into positions that previously would have been unthinkable; they include the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, Abdallah Dardari; the foreign minister, Walid Muallim; Syria's ambassador to London, Sami Khiyami; and Vice President Najah Attar (whose brother once was the leading figure within the Muslim Brotherhood). Breaking another taboo, Sunni figures started to make inroads within the security services. An Allawite businessman commented: "Bashar, having grown up in

¹⁴² Estimates vary widely and remain unverifiable, but Human Rights Watch assessed the number of casualties to be between 5,000 and 10,000. See *Syria Unmasked* (New Haven, 1991), pp. 19-21.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian intellectual, Hama, 20 October 2007.

¹⁴⁴ On 11 May, it was widely reported that tanks were shelling the city of Homs, although such claims remain unconfirmed. See, eg, BBC, 11 May 2011.

¹⁴⁵ When on 3 June dozens were killed during protests in Hama, the regime took the unusual step of announcing that it would hold the local security chief accountable, compensate victims' families and return all properties that had been confiscated at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising "within a month". See *Tishreen*, 12 June 2011. Subsequent massive anti-regime demonstrations there have been unhindered.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Hama governorate, Damascus, 25-26 June 2011.

¹⁴⁷ "Demonstrations started in Hama right before the opposition conference held in Antalya [Turkey]. I see it as a statement by the Muslim Brotherhood, marking its territory and formally joining the protest movement". Crisis Group interview, defence official, Damascus, 27 June 2011.

¹⁴⁸ See Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite*, op. cit. "Ghazzal is turning Homs into a pilot city. It will be the first to experience so-called electronic governance (e-governance) for instance. The notion has been floated of turning it into an administrative centre that could provide relief to a bloated capital. It is well located, at the crossroads between Damascus, the coast, Aleppo and the North-East". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 7 April 2010.

¹⁴⁹ See Myriam Ababsa et al., "Le territoire syrien", op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, March-June 2011.

¹⁵¹ For background on the gradual geographic and social extension of protests in Homs in reaction to the security services' brutality, see *The Economist*, 16 June 2011.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, June 2011.

Damascus, doesn't have his father's minority complex. His nominations reflect his comfort in dealing with Sunnis. Even the head of intelligence and the head of the police force are Sunnis. That was unheard of not long ago".¹⁵³

Bashar likewise deepened the trend toward greater recognition and tolerance of Sunni Islamic mores.¹⁵⁴ Under his rule, an Islamic "civil society" dramatically expanded. Islamic charities, educational facilities and cultural goods (such as religious books and chants) proliferated.¹⁵⁵ The regime allowed the female-run Islamist movement known as the Qubaysiyat¹⁵⁶ to take in spouses and daughters of leading Sunni officials, invest in numerous schools and kindergartens and expand out of the capital into the countryside. Prayer leaders such as Ramadan Said Buti and Rateb Nabulsi, who provided important backing to the regime during the 2005 Lebanese crisis, were given extensive radio airtime for their sermons and teachings.

Signs of devotion became commonplace even within the Baath party itself. A Christian intellectual lamented: "The regime has been transformed. It tolerates things it never would have in the past. One example among many: the Baathi prime minister, Naji Otri, performed the Hajj last year".¹⁵⁷ Some Allawites went so far as to wonder whether Bashar and Maher – both of whom had married Sunnis – had converted.¹⁵⁸

Even as it was willing to promote mainstream Sunni Islam, the regime sought to control what it saw as more threatening Islamist strands. The growing influence of Salafism,¹⁵⁹ in a country traditionally dominated by Sufi schools of thought, was deemed to present a long-term

menace.¹⁶⁰ Authorities closely monitored suspected jihadi salafists; they were sometimes arrested, other times tolerated, notably when they served regime interests, for example by crossing into Iraq to fight U.S. forces. The regime adopted an equally erratic approach toward "quietist" forms of Salafism, which seek to enforce strict behavioural codes. In late 2008, it suddenly launched a campaign to "re-secularise" society – combining a spectacular crackdown on jihadis and measures against Islamists in general – only to call it off during the 2008-2009 Israeli war in Gaza, when it saw an opportunity to rally Islamists to its cause.¹⁶¹ In early 2009, a security official commented:

Late last year, we were waging an all-out struggle against Islamists. Now we are asked to focus all our energy on corruption. There is an implicit message being sent to the Islamists which I interpret as follows: when you act against us, we crush you; when you are supportive, we will respond to some of your demands.¹⁶²

By mid-2010, the regime had reverted to its tougher stance, firing 1,200 education ministry employees for wearing the full veil (*niqab*) and examining the possibility of bringing all Islamic centres under state control.

By and large, however, the authorities were seen as progressively losing ground to the Islamists. Regime efforts to fight back fell short of all-out confrontation and generally did not threaten the interests of the country's traditional Sunni elites, whose religious conservatism historically has been moderated by their other inclination, business, making for a relatively pragmatic and flexible form of Islamism. The regime carefully nurtured the sense that it could coexist with the mainstream Sunni establishment, which in turn served it well during times of crisis. Once again, as protests broke out in 2011, prominent clerics remained remarkably loyal, with only few exceptions.¹⁶³ The first critical stance taken by Buti, for instance, came nearly three months after blood was first shed, when he

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2009.

¹⁵⁴ Tellingly, Hafez was buried by the renowned cleric Muhammad Said Buti according to Sunni rituals.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I)*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁶ For background on the Qubaysiyat, a network of highly conservative women engaged in subtle but systematic efforts to gain influence, see, eg *The National*, 12 September 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Damascus, November 2009.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 2009. Reflecting on the phenomenon of weddings between the sons of Allawite generals and Sunni women, a Sunni officer said half-jokingly: "One day, Syria will be entirely Sunni I think". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2009.

¹⁵⁹ "The term Salafism describes a movement that seeks to return to what its adherents see as the purest form of Islam, that practiced by the Prophet Mohammed and the two generations that followed him. In practice, this means the rejection of unwarranted innovations (*bid'ah*) brought to the religion in later years". Crisis Group Asia Report N°83, *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix*, 13 September 2004.

¹⁶⁰ For background, see Arnaud Lenfant, "L'évolution du salafisme dans la Syrie contemporaine", in Bernard Rougier (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme* (Paris, 2008).

¹⁶¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I)*, op. cit. Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group, whose activities in Syria the regime traditionally had restricted for fear of the movement's religious appeal in Palestinian camps and beyond, was given a freer hand. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Damascus, January 2010.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, February 2009.

¹⁶³ Demonstrations at the Rifa'i Mosque in the Damascene neighbourhood of Kafar Susa arguably had their origins in the 2008 crackdown, during which authorities arrested the son of the local prayer leader. Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 7 October 2008.

said that the use of force against peaceful demonstrations was illegitimate.¹⁶⁴

By contrast, more novel forms of Islamism that gradually have taken root in the provinces, notably in deprived urban areas, have presented the regime with a greater challenge. Although Saudi-style fundamentalism remains marginal, it has seeped into some areas; at a broader level, Salafi fundamentalist trends have permeated society more generally. Fundamentalists almost by definition are unaccommodating, owe nothing to this regime, are subject to foreign influence (not least because inhabitants of some of the most neglected provinces, such as Hawran and Dayr Zor,¹⁶⁵ turned to the Gulf for employment and, as a result, have been exposed to Salafi schools of thought), and are relatively disorganised. Unlike mainstream Sunni Islam, they do not take guidance from a small number of well-identified scholars who can serve as regime interlocutors, but rather from an array of local and global figures whose credentials are sometimes questionable and who tend to be uncompromisingly hostile to what they consider an apostate Allawite regime.

The Salafi threat became a leitmotiv in the official narrative, as the regime sought to explain popular protests through a strictly religious and sectarian lens. But there is little evidence that fundamentalism was the cause behind which protesters rallied; rather, the majority were motivated by grievances related to the socio-economic mismanagement, growing repression and a pervasive sense of injustice. Nor, for that matter, does the distinctive Salafist dress code feature prominently among demonstrators. Instead, what the regime must contend with is the relatively amorphous conservative outlook of the underclass.

All in all, and whereas the regime lost touch with its own social base, it successfully developed relatively effective relays to traditional Sunni elites, which explains their relative quiet at the uprising's outset. The authorities did so through a combination of business ties, political co-optation and a de facto modus vivendi with proponents of mainstream Islam. Even the banned Muslim Brotherhood, a relatively well-organised actor, was almost entirely absent from the protest movement, at least in its early stages.

2. The Kurds

In recent years, the regime's relations with the Kurdish minority (estimated at approximately 10 per cent of the

population, a proportion roughly similar to that of Alawites and Christians) reached an all-time low. Anti-Kurdish policies rooted in Arab nationalism had climaxed prior to Hafez Assad's 1970 takeover. A 1962 "special census" deprived 150,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship¹⁶⁶ and, more generally, contributed to the community's depiction as "alien"; by 1966, the regime had expropriated Kurdish-owned land bordering Turkey in order to populate it with Arabs and thus create a buffer zone between Kurds on both sides of the frontier.¹⁶⁷ Even as Hafez endorsed these measures, he sought to placate the community, by co-opting their religious dignitaries and tolerating various community-based social organisations. He did so not least to ensure their neutrality as he tackled Sunni Arab opposition.¹⁶⁸

Throughout Hafez's tenure, the regime, fearing Kurdish secessionist aspirations, adopted a seemingly paradoxical policy, both repressing such sentiment at home and helping Kurdish nationalists in neighbouring countries. On the one hand, it banned most visible expressions of Kurdish identity,¹⁶⁹ rejected any claim to specific minority rights within Syria; and denied all legal rights to the growing number of stateless Kurds (victims of the 1962 census and their descendants), turning their daily lives into an ordeal. According to one expert, it was difficult for stateless Kurds to "hold legal jobs, go to high school and university, and ride on public buses and sleep in hotels. These are things that need a Syrian identity card, which over 200,000 Kurds born in Syria do not possess".¹⁷⁰ It also

¹⁶⁶ While Kurds were registered as foreigners (*ajanib*) in 1962, many stateless Kurds were never registered at all; they are referred to as *maktumin*. According to one estimate, members of the latter category represent roughly a quarter of all stateless Kurds. See "Clarifying the citizenship decree for Kurds in Syria", Kurdistan Commentary, <http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com>, 17 April 2011.

¹⁶⁷ See Julie Gauthier, "Syrie: le facteur kurde", *Outre-Terre*, January 2006.

¹⁶⁸ For a remarkable study of the regime's ambivalent policy vis-à-vis the Kurds, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2009).

¹⁶⁹ In 1989, the governor of Hassaka, in the north east, banned all Kurdish-language activities, including singing songs during weddings and other festivities; three years later, authorities banned registration of children bearing Kurdish names. See Myriam Ababsa, "Idéologie spatiale et discours régional en Syrie", in Alessia de Biase and Cristina Rossi (eds.), *Chez nous. Territoires et identités dans les mondes contemporains* (2006). Beginning in 1986, the regime tolerated Kurdish celebration of Nawruz, the Kurdish and Persian new year, but only under cover of celebrating Mother's Day. See Julie Gauthier, "Syrie", op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ See Syria Comment, op. cit., 18 March 2011.

¹⁶⁴ See <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/06/13/le-cheykh-al-bouti-interdit-aux-militaires-de-tuer-des-civils/>.

¹⁶⁵ According to an intellectual from Dayr Zor, the town's small airport is far more connected to Kuwait City, with one flight daily, than to Damascus, with one weekly. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2011.

was impossible for them to travel abroad legally – they lacked a passport – or to formally get married.¹⁷¹

On the other hand, Syria harboured and assisted Kurdish nationalist parties from neighbouring Turkey and Iraq. In so doing, it pursued several objectives: to further foreign policy goals (in the context of hostile relations with Ankara and Baghdad); entangle domestic Kurdish elites into emerging smuggling networks (which generated and redistributed considerable wealth);¹⁷² and neutralise potential militants (by channelling them into organisations the regime could more easily monitor and control). Indeed, even as it denied Syrian Kurds any political rights, it encouraged their absorption into Kurdish national movements – notably Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – that were free to engage in cross-border trafficking, social activities and political militancy. This combination both fuelled and deflected secessionist aspirations among a local Kurdish population that until then had not seemed to harbour them.

The attempt to contain the Kurdish issue without addressing it collapsed in the late 1990s. Under massive pressure from Ankara, Damascus turned against the PKK, expelled its charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and cracked down on its activities. Home-grown forms of Kurdish nationalism simultaneously began to surface. They were embodied, most notably, in efforts of the Yekiti party, which as of 2002 staged demonstrations calling for respect for Kurdish rights.¹⁷³

Syria's posture toward Iraqi Kurds likewise backfired. Iraq's rival Kurdish factions reached a U.S.-brokered power-sharing agreement in 1998; by halting (for a time) their infighting, which Damascus had manipulated to its advantage, the accord substantially diminished Syria's leverage and heightened the two parties' prospects of establishing the precedent – dangerous from the Syrian regime's perspective – of Kurdish self-rule. Moreover,

Damascus's efforts, beginning in 2000, to normalise relations with Baghdad meant an end to its interference in Iraqi Kurdish affairs. Finally, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq reenergised Kurdish nationalist sentiment and separatist ambitions not only in Iraqi Kurdistan but beyond.

For a variety of reasons, Turkey, too, began to revisit its Kurdish policy, seeking to resolve its Kurdish problem through political and economic rather than strictly security means. In parallel, it expanded ties to Iraqi Kurdistan. This, combined with the spectacular economic development of Turkey's Kurdish areas along the Syrian border, sharpened the contrast with the Kurds' desolate situation next door.¹⁷⁴

The cumulative effect of these shifts climaxed in 2004, when protests broke out in the extreme north-east city of Qamishli. Although security services ruthlessly suppressed them,¹⁷⁵ tensions endured. In 2005, the murder of a prominent Kurdish cleric and outspoken regime critic, Mohammed Mashuq Khaznawi, for which there was no claim of responsibility, prompted another round of unrest that met a similar fate.¹⁷⁶ As repression intensified,¹⁷⁷ calm appeared to prevail. But it was wholly artificial. Bashar repeatedly promised to redress the 1962 wrongdoing yet failed to deliver.¹⁷⁸

Despite this painful legacy, the violent unrest that recently engulfed other parts of the country has spared Kurdish areas, as if both Kurds and the regime are intent on minimising risks of confrontation. For the Kurds to assume the lead in the protest movement might have allowed the regime to play up the ethnic divide and rally

¹⁷¹ Radwan Ziadeh, "The Kurds in Syria. Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?", U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report, April 2009. For a personal account, see "A Foreigner in My Own Country", Damascus Bureau, 21 June 2010. www.damascusbureau.org/?p=473.

¹⁷² On the smuggling industry, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit. Smuggling has enabled Kurds to thrive in the predominantly Christian town of Qamishli, near the Turkish and Iraqi borders, and progressively take it over. "The regime used to protect Kurds in the 1970s and until recently. It provided weapons and training to Kurdish militants on Syrian soil. It tolerated the fact that Kurds would take over Christian-owned land and property". Crisis Group interview, Syrian lawyer, Damascus, 20 October 2007.

¹⁷³ See Julie Gauthier, "Syrie", op. cit. Julie Gauthier, "The 2004 Events in al-Qamishli: Has the Kurdish question erupted in Syria?", in Fred H. Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria* (Saqi Books, 2010).

¹⁷⁴ "When Syria's north east and Turkey's Southern Anatolia were both left adrift, the situation was more manageable. Now one is making huge strides and not the other. In Syria, the Kurds are increasingly looking north as a point of comparison. It may not sound much, but on the Turkish side, for instance, Kurdish municipalities are governed by Kurds, which is unthinkable here". Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, January 2010.

¹⁷⁵ For a detailed account of the riots, see Julie Gauthier, "The 2004 Events in al-Qamishli", op. cit. See also "The Al-Qamishli Uprising. The beginning of a new era for Syrian Kurds?", Kurd Watch, December 2009.

¹⁷⁶ For an account, see Nicholas Blanford, "A murder stirs Kurds in Syria", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June 2005.

¹⁷⁷ "Group Denial. Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria", Human Rights Watch, November 2009.

¹⁷⁸ In 2002 Assad in person reportedly pledged to correct the 1962 census mistake. "A Foreigner in My Own Country", op. cit. He did so again following the Qamishli uprising. Myriam Ababsa, "Idéologie spatiale", op. cit. In an interview with Crisis Group in 2007, he also asserted that he would soon tackle the issue.

Arab support against a secessionist minority.¹⁷⁹ For their part, the authorities were determined to pre-empt any flare-up among a notoriously volatile constituency that, in addition to the north east, is present in several sensitive regions, such as Aleppo and Damascus. As early as February, the regime reportedly once again pledged to normalise the Kurds' status;¹⁸⁰ this time, it followed up its promise with concrete action in early March.¹⁸¹ A well-informed Syrian observer explained: "Bashar met with Kurdish leaders, and they reached a deal. The regime doesn't want unrest, and the Kurds don't want to be at the vanguard of the protests".¹⁸²

On 20 March, the regime acknowledged and celebrated the Kurdish New Year, which was shown on state television and extensively covered by the national news agency.¹⁸³ Kurdish demonstrations, which began in Qamishli on 19 March, have been recurrent, though they generally have remained relatively small, orderly, supportive of national unity and concentrated in unequivocally Kurdish areas. Many Kurds reportedly have been arrested by the security services,¹⁸⁴ but remarkably few deadly incidents have taken place.¹⁸⁵ The fact that the Kurdish community, unlike other constituencies taking part in the protest movement, is relatively well structured, with various (illegal) political parties as well as a network of Sufi religious opinion leaders,¹⁸⁶ means that credible interlocutors with which to strike a deal were available to the regime. In turn this lim-

ited the potential for the kind of escalation witnessed elsewhere.¹⁸⁷

3. The north east

The north east – home to an assortment of Kurds, Arab tribes and other minority groups – is both the richest region in terms of natural resources and the least developed. For the past several decades, the regime has governed it as a de facto internal colony. Due to the sensitivity of the Kurdish question, security services have essentially administered the area; virtually all of its civil servants come from other parts of the country; and the wealth that the state produces there rarely is reinvested for the local population's benefit. "On the one hand, the regime extracts resources from the north east: oil, gas, wheat, cotton, phosphates – it's all there. On the other hand, it sends people from elsewhere to staff the petroleum industry, local administrations, schools and so on. That is why there is such a sense of deprivation, among Kurds and Arabs alike".¹⁸⁸

Over time, the consequences have been disastrous. A resident said, "the north east is on its last legs. Whatever the yardstick – education, employment, services or infrastructure – the situation is catastrophic. It is an exceptional crisis which, for now, the regime has failed to treat as such".¹⁸⁹ Over the past several years, authorities made lofty promises; official delegations paid regular visits; and the government held an investment conference in March 2008. Yet, few tangible results have resulted.¹⁹⁰

The most apt illustration of the regime's approach was its handling of the water crisis that erupted in the past several years. Although authorities blame a long drought, in reality it only served to highlight the consequences of previous systematic bad governance. The crux of the problem lay in excessive pumping from the water table that was tolerated by a corrupt local administration; this was exacerbated when the regime reversed its past policy of agrarian reform to benefit large private-sector investors.¹⁹¹ As a journalist explained in 2009:

¹⁷⁹ A Kurdish resident of Damascus explained his kin's widely-shared feelings, days before the celebration of Nawruz, the Kurdish (and Persian) New Year: "We will celebrate Nawruz whatever happens. The context may be tenser than ever this year, but this is our one and only festivity in the year, and I can't see on what basis anyone could ban it. The situation is like an overblown balloon; one prick and it will burst. Kurds are not the only ones waiting for this moment. Many Arabs are too. The others would like us Kurds to be in frontlines again. We say: this is your turn". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 11 March 2011.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

¹⁸¹ The human rights monitor Kurd Watch claimed the social affairs ministry had taken the decision on 7 March to normalise the status of Kurds in all employment matters. Kurd Watch newsletter, 14 March 2011.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 17 March 2011.

¹⁸³ Syrian Arab News Agency, 22 March 2011.

¹⁸⁴ See, eg, "Interrogations and arrests of Kurdish activists continue in Syria", Kurdistan Commentary, op. cit., 24 April 2011.

¹⁸⁵ According to one count, human rights violations between 2009 and late June 2011 included 429 arrests, 151 cases of torture, three fatalities and three disappeared. Kurdwatch Newsletter, 1 July 2011.

¹⁸⁶ For a brief overview, see Paulo Pinto, "Sufism among the Kurds in Syria", *Syrian Studies Association Newsletter*, vol.16, no. 1, 2011.

¹⁸⁷ For an interesting interview of a militant describing how demonstrations are orchestrated and how security services respond, see Kurdwatch Newsletter, 1 July 2011.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Damascus, September 2009.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, intellectual, Damascus, 17 March 2011.

¹⁹⁰ By early 2011, however, presidential advisers had begun to suggest the regime would focus more heavily on this topic.

¹⁹¹ "In the north east, the average size of plots of cultivated land is increasing, sometimes beyond the average in a country like France. The largest plots are owned by a mix of traditional landowning elites and *nouveaux riches*". Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, November 2010.

The “drought” is a convenient excuse. The problem had long been forecast. [The dissident economist] Arif Dalila started ringing alarm bells ten years ago. Semi-arid areas around the Euphrates and the Khabur River, where agriculture was banned in favour of grazing, were turned into arable land used for intensive agriculture, at the cost of pumping the water table dry. The drought only brought to light a man-made disaster. And yet, the regime continues to bring diplomats to the north east and tells them it all has to do with global warming!¹⁹²

The crisis devastated the agricultural sector,¹⁹³ dramatically worsened poverty¹⁹⁴ and caused the displacement of large numbers of local residents. Security services reportedly tried to hold people back and prevent foreign journalists from both travelling to the area and reporting on the establishment of makeshift camps around Damascus and Aleppo.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, the regime set up food and cash hand-outs to entice people to stay in their deserted villages or return to their homes even as it failed to suggest – let alone put in place – a credible long-term policy. Instead, authorities increased the wheat production target and celebrated any drop of rainfall as if it could solve something. A well-informed businessman from the area lamented:

The desertification process and rural exodus in the north east are probably irreversible, but no one wants to raise the issue openly. The prime minister is behaving like a short-sighted employee: why should he ban pumping and thus assume responsibility for a decrease in output that would occur under his watch? He is thinking in terms of his personal interests rather than the country's.¹⁹⁶

That the north east traditionally was considered to be in the hands of the security services – whose members undoubtedly participated in the depletion of water resources through illegal pumping – likely encouraged officials to look the other way.

The crisis had severe, longer-term consequences for regime stability. Large numbers of impoverished citizens

were forced to move to the sprawling outskirts of big cities, making them even more combustible. Moreover, one of the regime's historical social pillars – the *Shawaya*, descendants of semi-nomadic tribes¹⁹⁷ – counted among those who suffered the most. Ironically, regime policies – notably the “counter-agrarian reform”¹⁹⁸ that benefited a narrow circle of opportunistic investors – replicated the kind of pillaging of local resources that originally had led the *Shawaya* to support the Baath.¹⁹⁹ As in other cases, the regime acted in ways that harmed its own social base.

Another key constituency from the north east whose conditions sharply deteriorated were the Bedouin tribes located along the Iraqi border. During the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency, some helped funnel funds and weapons from Saddam Hussein's regime (eager to undermine its Syrian arch-rival) to the rebels; as a result, their relations with Syrian authorities suffered in the 1980s and 1990s. By 2000, however, growing tensions between Damascus and the Kurds coupled with the Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement prompted the regime to seek to normalise relations with the Bedouin tribes. Indeed, Damascus sought to play them off against the Kurds and take advantage of their social networks within Iraq. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq consolidated these trends.

¹⁹⁷ These semi-nomadic tribes traditionally raised sheep along the Euphrates, in an area delineated by the commercial hubs of the Ghab to the west and Anatolia to the north, as well as by powerful nomadic tribes (Kurdish to the north east and Arab to the east and south east). They paid a form of tax to the nomadic tribes and worked on land owned by the Bedouins or large landowners, from Aleppo and Raqqa in particular, under virtually feudal conditions.

¹⁹⁸ See Myriam Ababsa, “Frontières de développement en Syrie: l'adaptation du projet Ba' thiste aux logiques tribales dans le front pionnier de la Jazîra”, *A Contrario*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005.

¹⁹⁹ To a large extent, the *Shawaya* turned to the Baath after the landowning feudal elite took advantage of the cotton boom of the 1950s and overexploited the area. Thanks to the Baathist regime, they escaped domination by Bedouin tribes and landlords from Aleppo and Raqqa; they also benefited from land redistribution as well as social promotion via party structures. In a town such as Raqqa, the *Shawaya* came to dominate the bureaucracy at the expense of the traditional urban elite; in Damascus, they were promoted within the power structure, as illustrated by Mohammad Said Bkhitan – the party's deputy secretary general – and Muhammad Hussein, a prominent member of the Baath Regional Command. They also enjoyed the benefits of local state services and development. Hafez's most impressive development project, the Great Euphrates Dam, aimed among other objectives at consolidating support from the *Shawaya*. A Syrian intellectual said, “historically, the *Shawaya* were the slaves of the east, while the Allawites were the slaves of the west. This, in my opinion, is why the two formed an alliance against the Sunni urban and rural elites”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, September 2009.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 23 November 2009.

¹⁹³ The crisis came on top of rising fuel costs and declining state purchases of crops, both of which had already pushed farmers to the verge of bankruptcy. Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, January 2010.

¹⁹⁴ For a good overview, see Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Eastern Syria grapples with drought, poverty”, Reuters, 27 January 2010.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 2009-2010.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessman, Damascus, November 2010.

By the end of the decade, the tribes' situation once again had changed for the worse. On the one hand, smuggling across the Iraqi border largely was curtailed as Syria shifted its approach to its neighbour.²⁰⁰ On the other hand, the agricultural sector was devastated as a result of the water crisis. The tribes, squeezed between dwindling smuggling and a ravaged agriculture, received no help from the regime which, as elsewhere, appeared wholly indifferent to growing social tensions.

Unsurprisingly, north-eastern towns such as Raqqa, Hasaka and Dayr Zor witnessed demonstrations, although they began belatedly, and their size was conspicuously small. As an explanation, a member of a prominent tribe mentioned the fear that, were the regime to collapse, the Bedouin would face retribution from the Kurds, who blame them for siding with Damascus, most notably during the 2004 uprising. Another tribal member said, "if things move in the north east, we will have lost on two counts. We never got anything from the regime; yet, were it to fall, Kurds would seek revenge against those Arabs who are at hand – and that means us".²⁰¹ More importantly perhaps, the regime's relative restraint in the north east arguably helped prevent the kind of rapid escalation and radicalisation witnessed in southern, central and western parts of the country. Tellingly, as soon as blood was shed in Dayr Zor, along the Euphrates, several weeks after the protest movement was unleashed, a similar dynamic set in between security services and an angry local population.²⁰²

4. The *Nazihin*

Displaced persons from the Golan, known as *Nazihin* (Arabic for displaced/refugees), have held a highly negative view of the regime for the past several decades. Following the 1967 war with Israel, the UN estimated that between 105,000 and 110,000 Golan residents, including 16,000 Palestinians, "moved from the now occupied part of Syria into non-occupied areas".²⁰³ This amounted to the vast majority of the area's residents,²⁰⁴ although some

Allawite and Druze villagers stayed put. Many displaced were members of Sunni Arab tribes who have retained a distinctive identity and accent, as well as powerful longing for their lost homeland. Scattered across Syria and having integrated the rest of society, they nevertheless form a cohesive network sharing a strong sense of solidarity. They and their descendants now number in the low hundreds of thousands.²⁰⁵

From the outset, the regime extended virtually no practical support to the *Nazihin* or even symbolic recognition of their plight, despite relentless official propaganda regarding Israel's occupation of the Golan. Ignored and left to their own devices, they were treated as if they were an embarrassment to the authorities, serving as a painful reminder of military defeat and inability to recover lost territory. Instead, the regime focused exclusively on Israeli actions and intransigence. The city of Quneitra, which is within Syrian control but was largely destroyed by Israel before its 1974 withdrawal, was left in ruins as proof of the enemy's scorched earth policy.²⁰⁶ Frequent commemorations are held, but for the *Nazihin* they typically add insult to injury. In 2009, for instance, the regime staged an extensive symposium on the Golan without even mentioning the refugee issue.²⁰⁷

Many of those interviewed by Crisis Group shared the belief that the regime was not serious about recovering its land, presenting itself as a proponent of "resistance" while enjoying the stability derived from a modus vivendi with Israel. Some went so far as to add that they would rather not see the Golan returned to this particular regime, which, they feared, would turn it over to Rami Makhlouf to build tourist resorts rather than hand it back to its original owners.²⁰⁸

Occasional clashes between the *Nazihin* and security services bear testimony to a long tense relationship. Even

²⁰⁰ See Crisis Group Reports, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I)*, op. cit.; *Reshuffling the Cards? (II)*, op. cit.; and Middle East Report N°77, *Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, 10 July 2008.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, daughter of prominent tribal leader, Damascus, 16 March 2011.

²⁰² For background on the gradual radicalisation in Dayr Zor, Mayadin and Bu Kamal as a result of the security forces' excessive force, see Phil Sands, "Syria Troops Move into Volatile Sunni Eastern Provinces", *The National*, 16 June 2011.

²⁰³ "Report by the Secretary-General pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 257 (1967)", 18 August 1967.

²⁰⁴ According to Yigal Kipnis, an Israeli settler who has researched pre-1967 Golan, on the eve of the 1967 war there were two towns, 139 villages and 61 farms housing 128,000

people. Crisis Group interview, Maale Gamla settlement, October 2006. Syrians offer roughly similar estimates. According to them, 148,000 inhabitants lived in the Quneitra governorate, essentially in the now occupied Golan, on the eve of the 1967 war. *Majmu'at al-Ihsa'at* (Damascus, 1966).

²⁰⁵ The displaced Golani population was estimated at 425,000 in 2002, according to Nawaf al-Faris, governor of Quneitra, quoted in Muhammad Abdul Ibrahim, *Al-Julan Bayn Matrakat al-Ihtilal wa Sindan al-Talawwuth* (Damascus, 2002). The Syrian government puts the number at 305,660. Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, October 2004, August 2005.

²⁰⁶ "Syria: Forty years on, people displaced from the Golan remain in waiting", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 31 October 2007.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, October 2009.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus and southern Syria, 2007-2008.

before unrest broke out in Deraa, the regime reached out to community leaders, seeking their assistance in keeping their neighbourhoods calm.²⁰⁹ Despite the depth of resentment, the *Nazihin* joined the fray belatedly, perhaps owing to their geographical dispersion and, here too, to the regime's relative restraint in areas where they tend to live. As often is the case, broader mobilisation was triggered when participants in small demonstrations became casualties, as occurred in the city of Hajar Aswad on the outskirts of Damascus.²¹⁰

As for Palestinian refugees, whose areas of residence and living conditions are similar to those of the *Nazihin*, they largely have remained quiet. This reflects a sense both of gratitude toward a regime that has treated them comparatively well and of vulnerability, given their status as aliens. This has placed them in an awkward situation as Syrian protesters have pressured them to join in and resented their alleged lack of solidarity.²¹¹

D. A GENERAL SENSE OF FATIGUE

By early 2011, most Syrians had abundant reasons to complain, even some minority groups that by and large had been considered supportive of the authorities. To the embarrassment of a regime that had strived to depict the protest movement as driven by Sunni fundamentalists, small demonstrations broke out in mid-April in Sweida – the capital of the Druze heartland – and Salamiya – a majority Ismaeli town.²¹²

In these instances, too, there were local explanations. The Druze mountain, south east of the capital, had been transformed under the Baath from a backward rural area into a more developed province boasting urban centres and enjoying state services; in more recent years, however, it has been left adrift, like neighbouring Hawran, most of its wealth associated with investments made by the dias-

pora.²¹³ As for the Ismaeli majority in Salamiya, east of Hama, it arguably has long held a grudge against the regime. The Baath party marginalised its educated, land-owning elite and instead co-opted the local Sunni minority. Security services, fearful of Salamiya's tradition of political activism and suspecting that the town had harboured Hama residents fleeing regime repression in the 1980s, had resorted to harsh measures and arrests even prior to the latest protests.²¹⁴ The recent drought only added to the list of grievances.

Even Allawites criticised the regime. As a local journalist put it:

This is a regime dominated by some Allawites, not an Allawite regime. The Allawite mountain is the second most underdeveloped part of the country preceded only by the north east and Aleppo's surroundings, which are an extension of the north east.²¹⁵

True, Allawite villages from which senior officials hail tend to showcase a luxurious villa and sometimes enjoy relatively privileged public services. But nearby locations almost invariably are in a state of disrepair.²¹⁶ Allawites are disproportionately employed by the security services, but more often than not this reflects their absence of alternative prospects (see below). An intelligence officer commented: "We have been made dependent on the regime rather than allowed to flourish and develop".²¹⁷ As a result, someone like Rami Makhlouf arguably has inspired more animosity among poor Allawites than among any other constituency, insofar as he symbolises monopolisation of national resources by a narrow elite that does not even redistribute wealth to its own community. That said, sectarian fears of a predominantly Sunni protest movement,²¹⁸ relentlessly stoked by the regime, have restrained any broad-based Allawite participation even as intellectuals from the community continue to count among the authorities' boldest critics.

Frustration extends to segments of society that most profited from regime economic policies. As the culture of corruption deepened, the inner circle around the president

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Damascus outskirts and surroundings, 23 February 2011.

²¹⁰ For an excellent overview of events in Hajar Aswad, see Phil Sands, "Inside the Syrian suburb of protest", *The National*, 29 April 2011.

²¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May-June 2011. A Hamas leader commented on the dilemma faced by the refugees: "This is a very dangerous situation for them. If they join the demonstrations, they could face harsh retribution from the regime that has hosted them. If they side with the regime, they risk alienating those among whom they live and who might someday take over. Instinctively, their sympathies lie with the protesters. But they have to be very careful". Crisis Group interview, exiled Hamas leader, Cairo, May 2011.

²¹² In the latter case, the security services' harsh response contributed to a serious escalation.

²¹³ Cyril Roussel, "Villes et bourgs en Syrie méridionale: les dynamiques communautaires", in *Villes intermédiaires dans le monde arabe*, Cahier du Gremamo, n°19, 2007.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, intellectual from Salamiya, 25 April 2011.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, July 2009.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group observations, December 2007.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, security official, Allawite village, December 2007.

²¹⁸ Early on, many Allawites in Damascus felt threatened by sectarian slogans chanted in Deraa. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 19-21 March 2011.

increasingly has resorted to predatory practices, treating the country as a whole as its private property. Whereas Makhlouf, for example, initially focused on major projects,²¹⁹ his appetite grew to the point where nothing was too small to warrant his interest: the sale of a minor plot of land in Damascus, a sub-sub-contract on a development project or the manufacture of basic goods. Such greed often pitted him against the traditional business establishment, comprised of small and mid-sized companies.²²⁰ Top businessmen themselves, despite close ties to the ruling family, at times resented Makhlouf's petty humiliations. As one put it, "the huge flag we just erected in Damascus was Makhlouf's brilliant idea, for which he asked others – myself including – to cough up the money".²²¹

To these specific grievances was added a widely shared sense that the promise of political reform had come to naught. Since Bashar assumed power, and despite numerous promises to the contrary, virtually no progress had been made in this regard. The vivid debates that marked the 2005 Baath Party Congress hardly produced any tangible result in subsequent years. In the words of a Baath-affiliated journalist, "the regime suggested a major turning point, but nothing came of it; most initiatives either stalled or were perverted".²²² Assad and other officials blamed the international community, whose pressure against the regime, they argued, meant they could not simultaneously heighten domestic risks.²²³ Yet, even though

outside pressure relented as of 2008, when Syria normalised relations with France, much of Europe, Saudi Arabia and, to an extent, the U.S., nothing changed.

By the end of the decade, popular hopes had risen visibly, but they quickly were dashed. Syrians expected a long-overdue, major cabinet reshuffle; speculation lasted for months, until April 2009, when the leadership merely replaced a few ministers. Likewise, the regime first floated, then dropped the idea of creating a senate as a first step toward reforming the political system.²²⁴ As preparations began for a planned 2010 Baath party congress, proposals to revive and implement reforms suggested five years earlier resurfaced.²²⁵ At first, rank and file party members interpreted repeated postponements as evidence of efforts to develop a comprehensive strategy.²²⁶ By March 2011, no date had been set; predictions for when the congress would be held ranged from the summer to early 2012. Meanwhile, senior officials stopped hinting at significant reforms.

2010 coincided with the expiration of the previous five-year plan and the initiation of consultations for the next. Here, too, given the economy's abundant woes, many shared the feeling that difficult decisions and serious prioritising were urgently required.²²⁷ Yet, internal scrabbling and lack of leadership²²⁸ confused even close observers: "I am empowered to share my views on Syrian policy, but in practice no one really knows what that policy is. I have access; I am even part of the system, but still I can't tell. The overall direction and how it is set is just so confused".²²⁹ When the party circulated a final

²¹⁹ "Rami may not be the most brilliant businessman, but he provides assets others don't. His companies are more professional than most, and the projects he undertakes have a high value-added. The previous generation hardly left anything as a legacy". Crisis Group interview, business partner, Damascus, 28 January 2010.

²²⁰ A businessman shared his concern: "Makhlouf and others have expanded from their original business area. They no longer focus on big contracts; they have an appetite for small ones, too. They are not content with real estate; they are interested in consumer goods. The smallest plot of land in Damascus, the pettiest import licence – they're on it! Rather than satisfying themselves with 20 per cent of the country's business, they behave as if they won't stop before they get 90. In so doing, we are systematically alienating the traditional business class". Crisis Group interview, prominent Allawite businessman, Damascus, 29 January 2011. Some of the businessmen supporting the protest movement have described their experience of Makhlouf's method of operation. See, eg, Lauren Williams, "Syrian businessmen back opposition conference", *The Guardian*, 30 May 2011. For a quick overview of Makhlouf's expansive business empire, see <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/06/28/rami-makhlouf-de-l'affairisme-a-l-illusionnisme/>.

²²¹ Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman, Damascus, 8 February 2010.

²²² Crisis Group interview, Baath-affiliated journalist, Damascus, January 2010.

²²³ See Crisis Group Reports, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I)*, op. cit., and *Reshuffling the Cards? (II)*, op. cit.

²²⁴ Crisis Group interview, prominent Syrian lawyer, Damascus, 6 April 2009.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Baath party members, Damascus, September 2009.

²²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Baath party members, Damascus, January 2010. In late April 2010, the Baath-affiliated daily *al-Baath* launched an appeal to intellectuals and economists to publish their ideas and suggestions, reigniting speculation that the congress would soon be held.

²²⁷ "So many issues have been left adrift that everything has become so complex and intricate. To design a genuine policy and form a government to implement it, we should go back to the drawing board". Crisis Group interview, Syrian diplomat, January 2010. "We are in a transitional phase. There is a dearth of clarity that needs to be urgently addressed". Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman, Damascus, January 2010.

²²⁸ "Divisions within the economic team complicate the task of articulating a consistent vision". Crisis Group interview, prominent businessman, Damascus, October 2010. An official involved in the process commented on Assad's aloofness: "There definitely still is tension between the urgent need for reforms and well-ingrained indifference to socio-economic issues". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 6 February 2011.

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, official, Damascus, 26 November 2010.

plan in early 2011, it failed to provide answers to any fundamental economic question. An economist said, “to put it simply, the plan ended up being a compilation of shopping lists sent by the ministries. It has little coherence and doesn’t define clear, workable priorities”.²³⁰ Instead – aside from vague references to such catch-phrases as “e-government” (electronic government) and “sustainable development” – it appeared to be based on the unrealistic assumption that foreign direct investment would underwrite the economy.

The reprieve the regime enjoyed on the international scene ended up being a missed opportunity. Numerous Syrians conveyed their feeling that the nation was at a standstill, sorely lacking any sense of direction. Their frustration centred on Assad, in whom many had invested hope yet whose leadership appeared curiously wanting. As the revolutionary mood swept the region, an intellectual with close regime ties presciently remarked: “Bashar started off as a reformist with great ambitions but no means to implement them. Today he has a free hand and no excuse. If he continues to behave as if he’s just here for the duration and doesn’t have to do anything, he’ll face serious trouble”.²³¹

E. THE SECURITY APPARATUS

Its expansive security services have served the regime well over the years; in the current phase, as will be described in a companion report, they have showed no mercy in efforts to crush the protest movement. For the most part, their seemingly unswerving loyalty has been interpreted as a consequence of their makeup; the praetorian military units (the Republican Guard) and the branches of the secret police (Amn al-Dawla, Amn Siyasi, Amn Dakhili, Istikhbarat ‘Askariya, Istikhbarat Juwiya, and the like), known under the generic name of *Mukhabarat*, are disproportionately composed of Alawites. Still, from the outset of the crisis, many of their members were themselves dissatisfied and hungry for change; an officer estimated that three quarters of his colleagues felt some sympathy for the protesters.²³² To date, this has not appeared to influence their behaviour, but it is a reality that could well affect the conflict’s dynamics at a future stage.

Most security sector jobs are unappealing; those that present opportunities for personal enrichment are eagerly fought over, and obtaining the desired position can require paying a bribe that necessitates borrowing money.

Most officers work long hours under difficult conditions for minimal pay. In 2008, a security officer working in a dangerous position that kept him awake most nights said he earned 13,000 SYP (less than \$300) monthly.²³³ When the cost of public transportation increased in May of that year, some of his colleagues either stayed at home in protest or slept at work, given how tight their monthly budget already was.

Crisis Group met a member of the president’s guard – the men in black suits seen around Assad’s offices and residence – who was driving a taxi cab in the middle of the night in order to supplement his meagre 10,000 SYP (slightly over \$200) monthly salary. Having spent a decade standing in the sun and cold, under strict disciplinary rules, he hoped that over the next couple of years he would be eligible to receive a flat in some distant suburb.²³⁴ Typically, such officers live in poor neighbourhoods that they share with Kurds, *Nazihin*, Palestinians and other social outcasts.²³⁵

In recent years, the security services also have been plagued by growing incompetence and corruption. Ironically, this trend largely can be attributed to Bashar Assad’s efforts to reassert control over the expansive police state inherited from his father. The young president removed key figures who operated with a high degree of autonomy under Hafez and had run mafia-style empires, accumulating personal wealth but also doling it out to lower-ranking officers to purchase their loyalty. The new appointees act differently; they hold their jobs for shorter periods, seek quick personal enrichment and thus no longer see any point in redistributing their ill-begotten wealth. A well-connected local journalist explained how the apparatus had evolved:

Under Hafez, security services were dominated by a few highly corrupt generals, yet they possessed genuine experience and real authority and were respected by their staff. Since then, there has been a quick turnover. Among new officials, some spend only a few months in a given position before moving on to another. They are still corrupt but often incompetent.

²³³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 14 February 2008.

²³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 March 2011.

²³⁵ Another officer, employed by one of the *Mukhabarat*’s most feared units (*Fere’ Falistin*) yet living in one of these suburbs, almost started to cry as he complained that, with a 13,000 SYP monthly salary (less than \$300), he never had had a chance to take his wife to a restaurant or children to an amusement park. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, July 2009. A more senior employee, living in central Damascus, said, “I feel financially squeezed. My salary has been reduced as a result of budget cuts, and the rise in the cost of living is never-ending”. Crisis Group interview, adviser to senior security official, Damascus, 8 February 2011.

²³⁰ Crisis Group interview, economist, Damascus, 16 January 2011.

²³¹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

²³² Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 21 March 2011.

They also are less inclined than their predecessors to share any of their wealth.²³⁶

A regime insider added: "The security services are led by largely unknown individuals. The new boys in town don't understand politics and have little interest in the matter".²³⁷ Yet, the security services simultaneously have been compelled to play an increasingly political role as other institutions decayed, including the Baath party, local government and the judiciary.²³⁸

High-level corruption generated growing resentment at the rank and file level. The predatory culture within regime inner circles became all the more apparent to security officers in 2009, when Assad launched an anti-corruption campaign.²³⁹ Although at first it appeared to boost the morale of security officials, who saw it as a form of social justice,²⁴⁰ this soon proved illusory. One of those involved in the investigations said, "we have been writing extensive files on corruption. The day we transfer them to the judges, the machinery of nepotism [*wasta*] kicks in, most often successfully. Corruption all circles back to a small group of senior officials. We know it. We see it. We document it. But we are powerless to do anything about it".²⁴¹

The security services' decision to close ranks behind the regime in the course of the uprising is less a function of loyalty than it is a result of the sectarian prism through which they have viewed the protest movement. In this

sense, their reaction reflects a communal defence mechanism. The brutality to which many among them have resorted arguably further encourages them to stand behind the regime for fear of likely retaliation were it to collapse.

Still, the basis of the security forces' cohesiveness remains tenuous. Perhaps its greatest weakness derives from the very same communal, sectarian reflex that has served the regime up to this point. Having suffered centuries of discrimination and persecution at the hands of the Sunni majority, Allawites – along with other minority groups – sought refuge in the mountainous sanctuaries of what are now Syria and Lebanon; in the end, only their home village can provide a genuine sense of security.²⁴² Deep down, they understand that their current control over the capital is transient, a historical parenthesis that sooner or later will come to a close.²⁴³ Twice in their recent history the Allawites have reacted based on their instinctive scepticism that their power would endure: first in 1982, when the regime appeared on the verge of collapse²⁴⁴ and later in 2000, when Hafez Assad passed away.²⁴⁵

If Bashar fails to chart a credible way forward or gives signs of foundering, security officials who ultimately owe him very little might suddenly vote with their feet. Already, his uncertain handling of the protest movement – labelling it a conspiracy one day, enacting a broad amnesty the next and more generally eschewing decisive action while establishing vague committees charged with finding political solutions – reportedly has left the security

²³⁶ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, March 2010.

²³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 29 January 2011. "The president brought the army and security to heel by retiring officers as soon as they reached the legal age or by transferring them across the country. Under his father's rule, there was a generation of revolutionaries who had enjoyed enough freedom to carve out real empires of their own. That no longer exists". Crisis Group interview, palace official, Damascus, 28 January 2010.

²³⁸ A senior official admitted that "the security services have substituted themselves for the judiciary because the latter is not functioning properly". Crisis Group interview, senior official, Damascus, 20 March 2011.

²³⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Reshuffling the Cards?*, op. cit.

²⁴⁰ "We currently have a broader mandate, which enables us to take action against ministries and even against military figures". Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, February 2009. "We are now 100 per cent focused on corruption, night and day. This is unprecedented. We even have latitude to attack corruption within other security services". Crisis Group interview, Syrian security official, Damascus, July 2009.

²⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, security official, Damascus, April 2010. As a result, "senior security officials are too often perceived by their staff as complicit in corruption, which causes frustration among the rank and file". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Damascus, 18 January 2011.

²⁴² An employee at the palace said of his Allawite colleagues: "I ask them why they feel the need to send their families to the mountain. Isn't it safe in Damascus? They answer: 'you cannot understand; you are not an Allawite'. Increasingly, they feel personally threatened". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2011.

²⁴³ An Allawite with close ties to the ruling family expressed this sense of insecurity as follows: "Why do you think so many of us make sure our children acquire another nationality?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 March 2011. As it were, the regime has done very little to bolster state institutions or create a sense of citizenship that could subsume and ultimately replace communal identities.

²⁴⁴ "I witnessed the [1982] events in Hama as a member of the security forces. In my view, the regime survived merely by chance. For two weeks, while Hama was in insurgent hands, Allawite officers in Damascus were moving their families and belongings to the mountain. Had the revolt spread to Damascus, they themselves would have disappeared". Crisis Group interview, former security official, Damascus, 18 March 2011.

²⁴⁵ "In 2000, so many Allawites were fleeing Damascus that we had to set up roadblocks to filter the traffic and hold them back". Crisis Group interview, security official, Allawite village, December 2007.

services both frustrated and confused (see the subsequent companion report).²⁴⁶

The military is far more opaque even than the *Mukhabarat*. Still, it is clear that the regular army has every reason to be dissatisfied. In its heyday in the 1970s, it benefited from massive Soviet assistance that ran the gamut from weapons to money to specialised training. Since that time, it has suffered repeated setbacks. Soviet support shrank rapidly as of the mid-1980s and vanished altogether with the USSR's demise. The army sought compensation for its losses essentially by pillaging Lebanon and turning corruption and racketeering into a full-fledged industry. Meanwhile, its hardware deteriorated, and its reputation plummeted. By the time Bashar took over, "the military was still relatively powerful and highly corrupt. He launched a major anti-corruption campaign but the military resented the fact that there was no equivalent within the civilian branch of power. They lost more than others did and are embittered".²⁴⁷ The 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon was yet another, decisive blow.

The military has since seemed to fade away, visible only through the obsolete and poorly maintained vehicles that are seen on the country's roads. Even generals, with few exceptions, have been marginalised within the power structure. A regime insider said, "military officers, together with the army as a whole, have been on a steep decline. They used to be able to pick up their phones to get whatever service they requested. Today, a minister won't feel compelled to take a call from an army general".²⁴⁸

Little is known about the military's role in suppressing the protest movement. Few defections have been credibly documented, and reports of army units stepping in as a buffer between protesters and security services²⁴⁹ are hard to confirm. However, there is ample reason to believe that this hollowed out and demoralised institution is of little use to the regime. The rank and file, hailing from the country's most destitute provinces, has too much in common with the protesters; regardless of their indoctrination and lack of access to independent information, the risk is high that they will see themselves in the people who are taking to the streets. Generally speaking, officers may be beholden to the regime, but their progressive demotion over the years, made worse by tacit discrimination against non-Allawites, could temper their loyalty. That said, pre-

cisely because it is hollowed out and demoralised, there is little chance that the army might take sides as a cohesive body against the leadership and counterbalance the security services, as occurred to various degrees in Egypt and Tunisia.

²⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, June 2011.

²⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 16 February 2011.

²⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, regime insider, Damascus, 29 January 2011.

²⁴⁹ According to local residents, this occurred at some stage in Tell and Kaswa, on the outskirts of Damascus. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May-June 2011.

V. CONCLUSION

Even as it faced an extensive list of grievances, the regime still possessed important assets. Skilfully and properly deployed, these might have enabled it to handle the growing popular challenge. This was the case during the protests' early stages, as unrest gripped Deraa and Latakia. But even then it would have necessitated a dramatic domestic policy shift as part of an effort to rally public support.

Specifically, it would have entailed recognising from the outset that the legacy of mismanagement described above required the regime to pay a high price – and to do so before bloodshed raised the level of demands further still. At the time, a comprehensive package comprising the various measures the regime subsequently conceded piecemeal and grudgingly over the following three months might have made a real difference. Such a sudden course correction and change in attitude would have allowed the president to showcase his understanding of the depth of popular aspirations; in turn, it might well have persuaded a large majority of citizens that reform was more promising than revolution. In short, had Bashar invested his considerable political capital to this end, before violence gravely eroded it, he might have afforded the regime a new lease on life and avoided much suffering for his people.

Of course, he would have needed not only the requisite foresight and courage but also the ability to do so. In this respect, the answer is not all that clear. At bottom, the protesters have been reacting to the collapse of the state and of Baath party structures, as well as to the regime's ensuing transformation into a mere compilation of individual, opportunistic, wealth-seeking forms of behaviour. To be effective, any response to popular demands thus would have had to entail dismantling the regime and, in its place, rebuilding the state as an instrument of broader political participation and fairer economic redistribution. That was no easy thing to do, let alone do quickly.

Entrenched elite interests, weak traditional institutions and the correspondingly disproportionate role of security services substantially narrowed any room for meaningful reform, tying the hands of even the most forward-looking within the leadership. With a hollowed-out ruling party, obstructive bureaucracy, rubberstamp parliament, corrupt local government administration and unreliable military, Bashar ultimately was left only with the security services upon which he became ever more dependent.

The regime long has sought to present itself as different from its counterparts throughout the region, notably in terms of its foreign policy. But the real difference would have been to avoid the mistakes that led to those regimes' undoing: banking on an exaggerated assessment of their popularity; treating unrest either as isolated, localised

problems or as the outcome of externally-hatched plots; deploying thugs to terrorise demonstrators; making vague and tardy concessions; and raising the fear of chaos.²⁵⁰ Unfortunately, as further described in a companion report to be published shortly, the regime made virtually all the wrong decisions at the worst of times, responding to the slow-motion remobilisation of Syrian society with its own slow-motion move toward suicide. It has not yet lost the fight and could even be said to have at least temporarily recouped some of its losses. But it nonetheless has turned a manageable crisis into something infinitely more dangerous for itself and for Syrian society at large.

Damascus/Brussels, 6 July 2011

²⁵⁰ This was recommended in Peter Harling, "La Syrie doit trouver une troisième voie", *Le Monde*, 22 March 2011. See also Crisis Group Conflict Alert: Syria (25 March 2011).

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SYRIA

