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Analyzing the domestic and international conflict in Syria: Are there lessons from political science?

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Introduction

This article contributes to the discussion about opportunities for and barriers to domestically-driven political reform in the Syrian Arab Republic. The argument is put forward in five sections. In the first section, relevant political science approaches analyzing the Syrian case from a domestic and global perspective are briefly discussed. The second section sketches the early political history of Syria between 1920 and 1970, while the third section explains how the regime led by Hafiz al-Assad was able to use the period after 1970 to consolidate Syrian statehood, establish a national security state, and emerge as a strong regional geopolitical player. Section four analyzes the period of the Presidency of Bashar al-Assad before the current crisis (from 2000 until March 2011). Lastly, section five discusses the recent escalation of the Syrian domestic crisis toward the largest armed conflict in the country's history. Section five also scrutinizes the domestic political reform program as advanced

by the Syrian government since April 2011 (essentially the new 2012 Syrian constitution and the new multi-party system). A conclusion sums up both the theoretical and empirical arguments.

1. Theoretical approaches to the study of Syria

In the study of Syrian affairs, domestic and international levels of analysis must be jointly considered. The most promising analytical approaches deriving from political science can be divided into those that highlight specific Syrian issues and those that focus on Syria in the context of the regional and international system. Five approaches appear to offer the highest analytical utility, moving in order of their analytical scope from a particular consideration of Syria toward those that are of more general applicability: (1) the theory of populist authoritarianism; (2) the focus on sectarian loyalties and weak nationhood/statehood; (3) analysis of the postcolonial 'rentier state' based on oil and other resource incomes and of the 'state class' that emerges in the context of the political economy of a rentier economy to advance autonomous social interests; (4) the neo-Gramscian approach in international relations theory that stresses transnational social class conflict; and (5) classical geopolitical analysis in the tradition of realist international rela-

tions theory. The remainder of this section briefly deals with each of these analytical approaches in turn.

First, the theory of populist authoritarianism explains the development of the modern Syrian state since the country's independence in 1946 as resulting from the mobilization of popular social classes challenging and defeating the *ancient regime*. After the withdrawal of the French colonial power from Syria, the postcolonial state between 1946 and 1963 initially 'acted as a mere executive committee of the landed commercial ruling class' (Khatib 2011: 60). This changed, however, with the emergence of populist authoritarianism based on the political mobilization of new middle classes and the peasantry. The Baath Party became the mobilizing factor after defeating competing political forces such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) in the battle for dominance of the Syrian army's officer corps (Seale 1988: ch. 5-6). The Syrian army in turn provided power and authority to take over and transform the old state. Thus, the theory of populist authoritarianism suggests that the Baath Party engaged in the controlled mobilization of popular social forces 'from above' to enforce social change such as the removal of the traditional bourgeoisie from political power and the advancement of social reforms favoring the popular social classes (Hinnebusch 2001).

The most significant achievements of populist authoritarianism are land reform (the distribution of land to popular sectors in the countryside) and the transformation of the state by way of expansion of a new public sector that owes its access to resources and upward social mobility exclusively to the new political regime. However, during the historical period of the so-called ‘neo-Baath’ between 1966 and 1970 when Salah Jadid chaired the regime the Syrian version of populist authoritarianism lacked stability and showed signs of political ‘adventurism’. The focus of Jadid on radical social change worked to limit the appeal of the Baath Party. Only after Jadid’s removal by Hafiz al-Assad in 1970 did populist authoritarianism stabilize—thanks to the creation of a more comprehensive political alliance. In particular, Hafiz al-Assad invited some sectors of the traditional bourgeoisie to re-join the regime while corporatist political bodies such as peasant organizations, unions and other mass membership bodies were built up in parallel. Overall, the radicalism of social transformation was downscaled. Moreover, the rapid emergence of Syria as a rentier state based on the exploitation of national oil resources in the 1970s and 1980s allowed further expansion of the public sector and limited industrialization while political and strategic rents (especially Syria’s alliance with the Soviet Union) allowed the regime to engage in the construction of a national security

state. In the 1990s, the populist authoritarian regime entered a structural crisis due to the stagnation and decline of oil revenues. This triggered a still ongoing crisis of direction since the regime now faced the choice between neoliberal economic reform policies based on a shift toward the new domestic bourgeoisie and international capital, and alternative efforts to sustain the alliance between the state and popular sectors. With respect to the latter option, the rentier state in crisis suffered from permanent resource shortages that made it difficult to maintain existing patronage or to offer any further concessions to the popular sectors.

A second theoretical perspective on Syria focuses on sectarianism (Dam 2011a). This line of analysis suggests that the structures of the Syrian state are ultimately controlled by some members of the Alawi minority sect ruling the country in an informal coalition with other minorities such as Christians and Druzes. On the one hand, the coalition of minorities selectively co-opts representatives of the Sunni majority into the ruling bloc. On the other hand, the state's repressive forces, such as special army units and the security services, remain mostly controlled by sectarian loyalties. Other potential sources of state authority, such as ideology or social class coalitions, are less significant by comparison. In summary, the proponents of this interpretation of the Syrian state suggest that past conflict

over power in the Baath Party and the army took an apparently ideological form but was actually decided along sectarian lines. Thus, the rise to power of Hafiz al-Assad and the setting-up of cohesive state structures since 1970, at least in comparison to the earlier period between 1946 and 1970, is held to be the result of tight linkages within the ruling elite that were consequences of the extraordinary cohesion of at least some sectors of the Alawi community backing up his rule.²

An extension of this interpretation is the perception that Syria is not a nation state and that the current crisis will result, ultimately, in the splitting-up of the country. The proponents of this view suggest that 'state nationalism' in Syria has failed and that the division of Syria along sectarian and ethnic lines into smaller Sunni, Alawi and potentially Kurdish and Druze entities should be expected. What speaks against this excessively ethnic and sectarian interpretation of Syria is that all postcolonial states in the region are 'state nations' rather than 'nation states' (Breuilly 1993). Moreover, the break-up of any Arab state in the region would certainly trigger intervention from outside and would have repercussions far beyond the borders of Syria. In summary, the populist authoritarian and the sectarian perspective both help to explain certain features of the Syrian state. However, it is not useful to place any single perspective above the other since 'it becomes almost impossible to disen-

tangle the sectarian argument from the political economy one' (Khatib 2011: 59).

Third, more general theories of economic development might also be useful to acquire a better understanding of the nature of the Syrian state. In this context, the most promising expansion on the theory of populist authoritarianism in Syria toward a general theoretical framework is provided by the theory of the rentier state and state class (Elsenhans 1981). In developing countries, capital accumulation in the domestic market is either missing or very limited in scope and the state lacks the capacity to enforce an effective tax system. Yet as soon as developing countries are in a position to exploit natural resources on a large scale and sell them to the outside world, state revenue no longer needs to be primarily generated domestically. Thus, in oil-producing countries the relationship between the state and the economy is reversed because state income determines gross domestic product and not the other way round (Luciani 1987: 65). Moreover, the direct appropriation of rent income by the state means that the bureaucracy does not need to 'legitimize their resource control in their interaction with other social classes, which results in the creation of a specific class—the state class' (Eckelt 2011a: 19).³

According to Elsenhans, the state class consists of all those employed in 'leading roles in the state apparatus, state

enterprise, and state-led political and societal organizations' (1981: 122). This class includes the higher levels of the state bureaucracy, state enterprise, army, and similar state-led bodies that enjoy higher than average incomes, prestige, and opportunities for political participation. Crucially, the state class is an elite class that differs from rank-and-file public sector employees. The latter are clients rather than members of the state class.⁴ The ruling segments of the state class tend to co-opt the most significant other social classes in society utilizing the control of rent income to construct networks of patronage. In this context, corporatist institutions are brought in to avoid the open escalation of political conflict: 'The relationship of the state to different social classes is not revealed in tax policy but in social policy.... [T]he state class legitimates itself in competition with other segments by improving the conditions of living of the population at large' (*ibid.*: 270). The historical task of a state class is to organize a transition process, from simply apportioning the rent between different groups (the initial stage) to productively and intelligently utilizing resource income in the service of national economic development. In case of success, states might use local agricultural surplus together with resource income to finance industrialization efforts and subsequently engage in export-oriented industrial policies to advance the position of the country in the international division of labor

(Elsenhans 2005: 163-164). In the Syrian case the transition toward the productive usage of resource income remains deeply contested. In particular, Syrian oil revenues were rather limited in comparison to those of the main OPEC producers and as measured in terms of resource endowment per head of the population. In the academic literature, it is often suggested that at least 40 percent of state income must derive from oil revenues to define a rentier state, and Syria has frequently received less (Basedau and Lay 2009). What was available was used to subsidize all kinds of domestic economic activity, including agriculture, while a large share was also spent on Syria's national security. Thus, rentier state theory must be conceptualized rather broadly: oil and gas revenues are only one of the potential sources of income for the state class while strategic and political rents must also be considered to explain the room for maneuvering to sustain patron-client relationships domestically.⁵ In conclusion, the theory of the rentier state might highlight some of the underpinnings of the behavior of the Syrian state class that are shared with many other countries. It also helps to explain why the extent of the remainder of the Syrian resource endowment (its expected value and the right of accessing it) is a crucial political variable.

The fourth theoretical school worth considering in the context of Syrian affairs is the neo-Gramscian perspective to

international relations (Cox 1983). This theoretical approach goes beyond the traditional focus on states as the main actors in international relations and focuses instead on the interaction between economic regimes and transnational social classes. The main focus is with social class forces and their political agency in contesting for leadership and hegemony at the national and international level. Resulting transnational dominant policy frameworks are considered to reflect a combination of state and class power. For example, the so-called ‘embedded liberalism’ of the Cold War era after 1945 and the more recent emergence of neoliberal capitalism since the mid-1970s are according to neo-Gramscian analysis due to elite consensus that emerged only after a period of severe crisis and class conflict (e.g. the rise of leaders such as Reagan and Thatcher focused on the exclusion of organized labor from policy formulation at the national level). Within this approach, hegemony might occasionally be based on cross-class alliances, such as occurred with the political co-option of social democratic parties and trade union movements during the period of Cold War liberalism. At other times, however, hegemony might be based on more narrow elite coalitions, such as occurred during the most recent period of the apparent dominance of finance capital over other class forces (the so-called ‘shareholder capitalism’ since the 1990s). In this respect, contestation between advocates of

social reformist and neoliberal policies inside of international organizations is one of the principle determinants of the rise and fall of hegemonic political ideas in the international system (Hudson 2005).

In the case of Syria, the state elite maintained a strategy of maximizing its own autonomy vis-a-vis international organizations until the 1990s. In marked contrast to many other developing countries that suffered from the debt crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, Syria enjoyed relative prosperity due to its self-sufficiency in agriculture and the absence of a debt record with western countries or western-dominated IOs such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. The country did not, therefore, engage in IMF-inspired structural adjustment programs—although some of the domestic austerity measures that were taken in the 1990s as a result of the end of Soviet assistance and the decline of income from oil exports triggered very similar social consequences for the poorest sections of the population. Under Bashar al-Assad, the country's leadership started to experiment with a more accommodating policy framework in the context of neoliberal capitalism. The former (2003-2011) Syrian deputy prime minister for economic affairs Abdullah al-Dardari was the most prominent representative of supply-side neoliberal reform policies in Syria. In line with World Bank advice, he focused on cuts in subsidies for

agricultural producers, removal of tariff protection, and the raising of domestic prices of subsidized commodities such as gas and fuel. These measures might be interpreted as Syria's increasing acceptance of the international neoliberal economic doctrine. They certainly worked to weaken the Syrian corporatist institutions that had previously expressed interest mediation and social compromise at the domestic level (Hinnebusch 2012). Nevertheless, proper interpretation of neo-Gramscian theory suggests that Syria remains characterized by the political control of most economic policies, a core feature of rentier states. Accordingly, the regime still navigates between the forces of economic liberalization representing private capital at the domestic and international level, on the one hand, and the 'corrective wing' representing the Syrian public sector and popular forces on the other hand.

The fifth theoretical perspective on Syria is provided by classical geopolitical analysis which focuses on the influence of geographical factors on the conduct of politics and international relations. In the context of the modern Middle East, the efforts of the United States (U.S.) to assume the role of the only veto power in the conduct of Arab regional politics structures the behavior of all competing powers. The U.S. policy of enforcing and defending a veto role derives from the takeover of formerly European (i.e. British and French) influence in the region after

WWII. In this respect, the most significant single step was the 1944 agreement between U.S. President Roosevelt and the Saudi King Ibn Saud that established a close strategic alliance between the two countries. Afterwards, the U.S. largely replaced British and French influence in the region, leaving the latter powers only token representation—for example the connection between Maronite Christians in Lebanon and France and the linkage between the Jordanian monarchy and Britain. U.S. strategists described the agreement with the Saudi King, which allowed U.S. companies access to Saudi oil fields, as ‘a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history’ (Merriam 1945, quoted in Gendzier 2011, footnote 3).

The U.S. regional policy of exclusive strategic leadership was formalized in the Eisenhower Doctrine, which considered any intervention of competing powers in the Middle East as unacceptable. In addition, the U.S. took over the role of France as military patron of Israel in the late 1950s. Direct U.S. military intervention in Lebanon in 1958 further underlined the geopolitical decline of France in the region.⁶ The U.S. subsequently faced significant geopolitical backlash due to the challenge of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser who managed to politically defeat the joint Franco-British and Israeli invasion during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 by tactical alignment with

the U.S. before shifting Egypt toward an alliance with the Soviet Union (Haykal 1973; Yaqub 2004: 5-8, 20). This U.S. defeat in Egypt was ultimately reversed after Nasser's death; but the U.S. once again lost control of a significant regional ally when the Shah of Iran was removed from power during the Iranian revolution of 1979. From the Syrian point of view, the local geopolitics offered Syria the position of a 'swing state' in regional geopolitical affairs, which allowed the country to choose alliances with each of the other three main regional Arab powers, namely Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia (Yaqub 2004: 36). Syria first aligned with Egypt under Nasser but the U.S. in effect broke this link in the early 1970s after Nasser's death. In reaction to its isolation in the Arab world, Syria subsequently formed a defensive alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran (a non-Arab power) after the 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequently with the Shiite Hizballah party in Lebanon in the 1980s.

This alliance (the so-called 'axis of resistance') has gained additional significance due to the economic and political rise of Russia and especially China. In particular, China's recent interest in Middle Eastern oil resources—necessary for energy-poor China to maintain its industrialization drive and high growth rates—is a main factor to explain U.S. conduct in the region (Almond 2003; Brzezinski 1997: 55). As for Syria,

the country's leadership tried at least twice in the 1990's to improve relations with the U.S. In this context, Hafiz al-Assad engaged in sustained negotiations with George H. W. Bush during the time of the second Gulf war in 1991 and with Bill Clinton in the context of the Madrid 'peace process' in the mid-1990s (Gani 2011: 241-245). In both cases, the Syrian leadership learned that elite diplomacy did not result in the willingness of U.S. policymakers to support legitimate Syrian demands, especially the return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to Syria. In summary, the behavior of the government of Bashar al-Assad since 2000 and the strong focus on the regional and international alliances between the Syrian government and supportive external powers (Iran, Russia, and China) is due to long-standing experiences with U.S. behavior in the region.

Only by combining different theoretical perspectives—focusing on the structure of material interests, social forces, and ethnic divides on the one hand, and the awareness of the interaction between Syrian domestic forces and the regional and international system on the other, is it possible to capture the complexities of Syrian politics. In fact, the resilience of the Syrian state under pressure since March 2011 has underlined that the regime continues to be deeply rooted in Syrian society.

2. Syria's political history from 1920 until 1970

The history of modern Syria derives from the division of the Levant region, known as the *Bilad al-Sham* during Ottoman times (Arabic for 'the country of Syria'), after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 into smaller states. These new state entities were given as 'mandates' of the League of Nations system to Britain and France. This decision was the direct result of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, named after a British and a French diplomat, in which the Levant region had been divided into a British and French zone of interest (see BBC 2001 for a map; WWI Archive (no stated date) for the full text). During the subsequent French rule in Syria and Lebanon (1920-1946 in the former and 1920-1943 in the latter case), the French authorities focused heavily on 'divide-and-rule' policies along ethnic and religious lines. First, the French severed Lebanon from Syrian territory and created a 'Greater Lebanon' by adding territory east of Mount Lebanon to the new state entity. This decision created a demographic balance between Maronite Christians and Sunni and Shiite Muslims, thereby bringing into being a territorial state in which 'most Lebanese owed their primary allegiance not to the nation but to their religious sects' (Yaqub 2004: 37).

Similar considerations governed French rule in the remainder of the Syrian mandate. Here, the French aligned them-

selves with the Alawi and Druze minorities. These groups were given priority in being drafted into the French colonial armed forces, the *troupes specials*. French strategists were keen to experiment with a ‘canton’-like system of subdividing Syrian territory. Therefore, they delegated authority to various local leaders in order to create a power balance based on sectarian and regional divisions. This was supposed to limit the appeal of the emerging predominantly Sunni Muslim Arab nationalist movement which demanded Syria’s independence from France and considered the separation of Lebanon from Syria as an artificial construct. In 1938, the Turkish military entered the Syrian province of Alexandretta (the northern Mediterranean coastal area of Syria) and expelled sections of the local Arab and Armenian population. The territory was subsequently incorporated into Turkey as the 63rd Turkish Hatay province. This annexation of Syrian territory was agreed by the French colonial authorities to improve relations with Kemalist Turkey but post-independence Syria has contested the decision ever since.

While the British and French wished for small political entities to exercise effective control, the emerging pan-Arab nationalist movement stressed the unity of the Arab nation. Arab nationalism became defined as being based on the shared use of the Arab language rather than the territorial unity of the

Arab peninsula. It was as a result of this shift toward cultural nationalism that Egypt and the countries of the Maghreb started to be associated with pan-Arab nationalist aspirations (Devlin 1991). When Syria became independent in 1946, the state was exceptionally fragile. In marked contrast to Lebanon, in which a ‘National Pact’ of 1943 between the Sunni Muslim politician Riad el-Solh and the Maronite Christian politician Bishara al-Khuri allowed the construction of a political regime based on power sharing between different sects (Seale 2011), no such formal agreement was reached between the various sects in Syria. As a result, postcolonial politics remained in the hands of traditional notables and the landed gentry. In addition, regional divisions within Syria, such as the conflict between Damascus and Aleppo-based political leaders, together with the exclusion of popular sectors from effective participation in politics, made the postcolonial Syrian state a rather weak entity.

Between 1946 and 1963, Syria found itself largely at the receiving end of regional and global power politics, and it frequently suffered covered US and neighboring Arab countries’ interference in its domestic affairs (Copeland 1970; Seale 1986; Rathmell 1995: 138-144, 163-166; Dostal 2014). In the political science literature of the time, Syria was presented as ‘the *coup* country *par excellence*’, having experienced more than a dozen military coups since independence (Luttwak 1979 [first

edition 1968]: 85). Because of weak statehood, the Syrian army quickly emerged as the single-most effective tool to exercise political power. Since the army had been historically considered an unacceptable career choice for members of Syria's traditional upper classes, it was young officers from the lower and lower-middle-classes and from the ethnic minorities who gained positions that would allow them subsequently to compete for state power (Seale 1988: 38-39).

Alongside the rise in influence of the army, Syrian politics in the 1950s was also characterized by the emergence of new political parties that aligned themselves with ideologies of popular sectors. The three most significant forces were the Baath Party, the SSNP, and the Communists (SCP). Their ideological differences concerned questions of pan-Arab unity and the issue of socialism—the Baath Party was ideologically committed to pan-Arab unity, while the SSNP, led by the Greek-Orthodox Antun Saadeh, insisted that a greater Syrian nationalism should unite a 'fertile crescent' reaching from Cyprus and Lebanon via Syria to Iraq into a single state based on a shared cultural heritage that was declared to be substantially different from other Arabs. According to the SSNP, this would allow the founding of a greater Syria. As for the question of socialism, the Baath declared itself committed to 'unity, freedom, and socialism' but rejected Marxist theories. The SSNP

of the 1950s was originally non-leftist in its discourse but later became more social-populist, while the Communists essentially followed the Soviet Union's leadership but still suffered internal divisions over the question of its relationship with the Baath Party.

The Arab nationalism of the Baath Party, founded by the Orthodox Christian Michel Aflaq (1910-1989) and the Sunni Muslim Salah al-Din al-Bitar (1912-1980), was based on a demand to unite all Arabs, defined in terms of shared language and culture, into a single Arab state. In the beginning, the party aspired to develop branches in all Arab countries, and the party's leadership was therefore divided into a so-called 'national command' (a pan-Arab leadership structure that was notionally in charge of the entire party) and a 'regional command' (the leadership structure dealing with Syrian affairs).⁷ However, following the rise of Nasser in Egypt and of a subsequent pan-Arab Nasserist movement, the historical Baath Party leadership around Aflaq decided to accept Nasser's leadership role. The party was subsequently dissolved to prepare for the unification of Egypt and Syria during the United Arab Republic (proclaimed in 1958 and dissolved by the exit of Syria in 1961). Following the failure of this short-term political experiment with Arab unity, the historical leaders of the Baath Party lost most of their former influence.

The party was now increasingly controlled by a military committee of Syrian army officers that included Hafiz al-Assad. This group took power in Syria in a coup on March 8, 1963. Another coup on February 23, 1966, consolidated the rise of the so-called 'neo-Baath' and further sidelined the older Baath leadership. The 1966 coup, in particular, resulted in the rise to power of a collective body of Baathist army officers led by Salah Jadid that was mostly Alawi in origin and in which Hafiz Al-Assad served as defense minister. Under Jadid's leadership, the Baath Party adopted a leftist profile and engaged in land reform confiscating land from large landowners. This move was backed up by the foundation of the Peasants' Union in 1964 that became a pillar of Baathist influence in the countryside (Eckelt 2011a: 30-31). As for Arab affairs, the Jadid leadership promoted engagement in a 'people's war' to liberate Palestine, and it was willing to offer Palestinian militants military support in their conflict with the Jordanian state authorities. However, this alliance was not strong enough to prevent the military defeat of Egypt and Syria in the 1967 war with Israel and the loss of the strategically and economically significant Golan Heights that have since been occupied by Israel.

3. The Presidency of Hafiz al-Assad (1970/1971-2000)⁸

On November 16, 1970, Hafiz al-Assad led another coup—termed the ‘Corrective Movement’—that removed the more radical sections of the Baath Party under the leadership of Jadid from power. This turned out to constitute a decisive turning point in the history of modern Syria. In marked contrast to earlier Baathist leaders, Hafiz al-Assad was able to construct a stable political system that allowed the Syrian state for the first time to become an influential regional player. In order to explain this transformation of state and society, economic and political factors must be jointly considered. In economic terms, Syria started to take off as a rentier state in the early 1970s thanks to the expansion of oil rents and strategic and political rents. These derived in turn from rising oil prices and improved relations with richer Arab Gulf countries, thereby allowing for the rapid expansion of the Syrian public sector.⁹ Subsequently, public sector workers enjoyed privileged access to social policies such as guaranteed jobs, free health care, old-age pensions, public transport, social services, and some public housing facilities (Eckelt 2011a: 60). In addition, the state controlled prices of basic goods such as fuel, petrol, bread, and certain staple foods. In the countryside, oil revenues were utilized to provide price guarantees for agricultural producers that allowed rural workers to participate in the rise in the standard of living.

Overall, the 1970s were characterized by rapid urbanization and a transition in the labor market. At the beginning of the decade, one in two Syrians was working in agriculture while only one in four did so at the beginning of the 1980s (Eckelt 2011a: Appendix IV).

In terms of Hafiz al-Assad's reorganization of the political system in Syria, a marked shift took place toward a 'palace-type' of political authority that replaced the earlier system of collective leadership. The new system was characterized by the dominance of the president, who alone assumed the position of controller of all other institutions. Here, Assad was probably inspired by the example of Nasser in Egypt who had been very successful in stabilizing his rule by engaging in role distribution to other major officials while reserving to himself the exclusive right of political coordination (Baroutt 2011: 12). Under the new presidential system, the Syrian state became defined by the following major institutions: (1) the president, who is in charge of the 'Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic', which has purposefully blurred boundaries; (2) the army; (3) the security services, which operate independently from each other and without any inter-agency coordination; (4) the formal state institutions consisting of a government and ministries headed by a prime minister and assisted by a parliament (the People's Assembly)¹⁰; and (5) the regime's corporatist institu-

tions such as the Baath Party, the other legal political parties organized in the ‘National Progressive Front’ (NPF), founded in 1972, as well as the Peasants’ Union, trade unions, and similar bodies.

Thus, the most significant feature of the Syrian political system is the concentration of power in the Presidency. The Syrian president is the commander in chief of the armed forces, controls the security services, and has also been the secretary general of the Baath Party. While the political domination of the president was codified in the 1973 Syrian constitution, it is significant to appreciate that the office is characterized by formal and informal powers: ‘The president can govern by way of ordinances and decrees and has the right to initiate laws in Parliament. The government and the 14 provincial governors are appointed by the president and directly responsible to him. The government consists of a prime minister and a variable number of ministers. [O]pportunities of the president to intervene directly into day-to-day policymaking are not based on well-defined presidential institutions. Instead, decisions are taken on the basis of consultations with advisors and ad-hoc working groups’ (Eckelt 2011a: 55). It follows that the Syrian president is free to shape the office according to his own interests: direct leadership can be exercised whenever suitable, while authority can also be delegated at will to other people who own their po-

sition directly to the president. Indeed, Hafiz al-Assad decided to focus his attention on foreign policymaking and defense while delegating the management of Syria's economy and other domestic issues to close assistants. He explained his choices by stating that 'I am the head of the country, not of the government' (Assad, quoted in Seale 1988: 343).

In terms of the actual exercise of power, observers of Syrian affairs have pointed out that the informal security apparatus, based largely on sectarian loyalties and directly answerable to the president, backs up the formal state institutions. Thus, many state offices act as little more than a facade for the actual power holders. In other words, Syria's official government is one component of the Syrian regime, but it does not necessarily belong to the core of the power elite. In addition, the different formal and informal institutions mutually overlap and reinforce each other. For example, the army enjoys privileged representation in the leadership of the Baath Party that is, in turn, based on a hierarchy consulting with the president in his role as party leader. Until the 2012 amendment of the Syrian constitution (further discussed below), the Baath Party was the 'leading party in the society and the state' (article 8 of the 1973 Syrian constitution), and it was charged with the running of public sector institutions in the economic and educational field and in the army. In summary, the exceptionally strong role

of the Syrian president makes it practically impossible for the other formal institutions to exercise checks and balances or to issue vetoes with respect to presidential actions.

Briefly summing up the main events during the long rule of Hafiz al-Assad, economic affairs were determined by increasing access to oil revenues and political and strategic rents. Such resources could be used according to political objectives and spending focused on the army and the public sector. The main problem of managing state budgets was, however, that oil revenues fell with the decline of oil prices that started in the 1980s, while the political and strategic rents were also highly unstable and depended on Syria's geopolitical environment. Thus, Syria enjoyed periods in which the rich Arab Gulf states were willing to provide assistance to the Syrian state, such as after the 1973 war with Israel, but suffered uncertainty too, as such political and strategic rents could disappear at short notice. In addition, the Syrian leadership received substantial economic and military assistance from the Soviet Union before and, more substantially, after the 1973 war in order to support the Syrian doctrine of 'strategic parity' with Israel in the military field. (Although the Syrian army subsequently developed into one of the strongest regional armies, the Syrian economic foundations were never strong enough to allow reaching the goal of strategic parity.)

In terms of managing the Syrian domestic economy, Assad started his Presidency in 1971 by trying to establish better relations with the representatives of the traditional urban Sunni bourgeoisie. During the entire period of his rule until 2000, economic policymaking shifted between the poles of increased economic liberalization, as advocated by representatives of the traditional and new (regime-dependent) bourgeoisie, and ‘corrective measures’ to support the public sector, as demanded by the statist Baathists. This triggered cyclical competition: whenever the rent income of the state declined, the economic liberalization wing advanced while the statist Baathists reasserted their position when rent income was on the increase. It is plausible to argue that this helped to ‘contain both the right and left mechanisms of the political regime. Thus it achieved a sharing of power and managed the various stances emanating from within the regime’ (Baroutt 2011: 13).

Over time, this process resulted in the increased power of the liberalizers. Various political turning points in favor of the liberalizing wing can be pointed out. For example, the first ‘infītah’ (Arab term for ‘openness’) after the accession to power of Hafiz al-Assad in the early 1970s, and the second ‘infītah’ based on the Investment Law no. 10 of 1991, were certainly significant stepping stones in moving ‘from the theory of the central leadership role of the public sector to “economic plural-

ism” in all public, private and joint sectors’ (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the regime never turned *fully* against its public sector constituencies, because the very nature of the rentier state demands that the state class exercises leadership based on public sector policies and the maintenance of corporatist institutions. Thus, experiments with the liberalization of the economy remain ultimately under the political command of the state class, which in this way ensures its own political survival.

As for measures concerning political integration, Hafiz al-Assad expanded the network of corporatist political organizations under the guidance of the governing Baath Party. This amounted to a process of ‘integration from above’: Nasserite and Communist organizations were invited to join the National Progressive Front and were also granted representation in the People’s Assembly (the Parliament), although the only NPF parties with a significant degree of popular support were the two factions of the Communist Party. In addition, the Kurdish minority received a degree of parliamentary representation and, in the 1990s, the new bourgeoisie was allowed to use the Chamber of Commerce as a lobbying body in its interaction with the government.

Such ‘integration from above’ was contested by opposition from below. The main forces of the Syrian anti-government opposition in the 1970s were secular leftist parties

and the Muslim Brotherhood. In the case of the former, the leftist groups suffered intense repression at the hands of the regime at the beginning of the 1980s from which they never recovered. In the case of the latter, the Muslim Brotherhood was originally characterized by a more moderate and a more radical wing and was also divided along regional and generational lines. Due to various external events, such as the intervention—originally on the side of Maronite Christians—by Syria in the Lebanese civil war after 1976, the radical Brotherhood wing gained the ascendancy. It started to shift from agitation against the secular Baath regime toward an armed sectarian campaign against the Alawite minority between 1976 and 1982 (Khatib 2011: 71-73; Lobmeyer 1995: 199). In this conflict, the Brotherhood was initially able to gain a certain degree of support from social constituencies that included craftsmen, traders, and elements of the traditional Sunni-urban bourgeoisie. In addition, some professional organizations of doctors, engineers, and lawyers were also at various points in time under the influence of the Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the radicalized and armed Brotherhood failed in the contest for power with the regime, largely because the degree of support for the Brotherhood in Syrian society remained limited in scope and even at its highest point in the late 1970s never exceeded 30,000 (Daraj and Barut 2006, quoted in Khatib 2011: 81; Dekmejian, quoted in Lobmeyer 1995: 384).

Nor did urban workers employed in the public sector or the rural population extend any significant degree of support to the Brotherhood (Lobmeyer 1995: 389-390, 394). Moreover, the Brotherhood did not undertake serious efforts to construct a broader political coalition with other opposition forces. For example, the short-term political alliance with the leftist secular opposition at the beginning of the 1980s lacked credibility and ‘reflected in reality a deep cleavage between Islamists and secularists whose commonality remained limited to shared hostility to the ruling regime’ (*ibid.*: 301). More important, the Brotherhood accepted foreign financial and military assistance, principally from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and conservative Gulf states, to start a campaign of urban terrorism against the Assad regime (Seale 1988: 335-338). The campaign of violence soon escalated, and rising numbers of regime representatives including pro-regime Sunni religious scholars were assassinated. There were some attempts to stop the escalation of violence, including regime efforts to come to an agreement with the Brotherhood in 1979, but these efforts all failed. In 1982, the Syrian army’s crushing of the uprising of the Brotherhood in the city of Hama ended the insurgency and resulted in the full-scale defeat of the organization.

The political and military defeat of the Brotherhood underlined that the Assad regime was still able to rely on a suffi-

ciently large coalition of domestic supporters and that the Brotherhood's policy of self-isolation and armed attack on the state had failed. This was in spite of the significant degree of external support that had been offered to the Brotherhood from a large coalition of outside powers who were keen to remove Assad and the Syrian state class from power. In the years after 1982, and until the end of his life, Assad worked to improve the relationship with the Sunni community in general and Sunni religious leaders in particular. This policy of accommodation was based on efforts to promote a moderate religious leadership by offering state resources for a large Mosque building program. One of the results of this policy, matched by similar efforts to sustain good relations with the other religious communities in Syria, was an improvement in the relationship between the state and religious leaders—while earlier strongly secularist views of the Baath Party were increasingly sidelined (Khatib 2011, 2012).

In summary, the leadership of Assad sustained the Syrian state class in power between 1970 and 2000. The first decade of his leadership was the most dynamic period in economic terms with high growth rates that are typical for countries in transition from an agricultural toward an industrial and service economy. The Syrian state engaged in this period in land reform and industrialization efforts that produced mixed results.

In terms of agricultural reform, the scope of land distribution might have been too limited while efforts to increase agricultural productivity were more successful. As for industrialization, the build-up of state-owned industries was not comprehensive enough to create strong linkages between sectors, and many public industries were from the beginning loss-making entities. Nevertheless, these policies strengthened the country's economic autonomy and domestic social compromises based on expansion of the public sector. While the state still ultimately relied on income deriving from oil sales and political and strategic rents, Assad nevertheless sustained some degree of political autonomy of the state class. The Syrian state remained practically independent from the international financial institutions, and Syria's membership in IMF and World Bank did not result in any substantial economic involvement with these bodies. In short, the country always enjoyed some real sovereignty in dealings with allies and adversaries

At the same time, there was already a slow but steady decline in the ability of the state class to advance comprehensive social policies that would have allowed Syrian society in general and the rank-and-file of the state class in particular to be confident about future upward social mobility. (One of the indicators for the decline of internal social reformism was the failure of state employees' salaries to keep in line with rises in

the cost of living.) In addition, internal cleavages within the state class were already observed during the 1980s when a ‘new class’ or ‘military-mercantile complex’ of regime representatives started mingling with representatives of the Sunni Damascene merchant class. This amounted to a ‘coalescence of those from different societal origins around newly encouraged economic activity’ (Terc 2011: 44). It was this new class faction originating from within the regime that subsequently advanced its economic demands in the context of global neoliberalism, demanding increased freedom for entrepreneurship and private capital interests, thereby questioning the internal unity of the state class.

4. The Presidency of Bashar al-Assad since 2000

The accession to the Syrian Presidency of Bashar al-Assad following the death in office of his father Hafiz al-Assad on June 10, 2000 underlined the fact that the Syrian ruling elite did not wish for any open contestation for power amongst the representatives of the older leadership generation. Hafiz al-Assad’s style of leadership, which had denied any of his close associates the role of a natural successor, worked in favor of allowing his son access to the highest political office. The new president (aged 34 at the time of assuming office) symbolized genera-

tional change and the opening up of the country to new cultural influences, from the expansion of English-language instruction in the education system to the introduction of the internet (Hinnebusch 2009: 12-13). Directly after the Syrian presidential succession, western commentators focused on the question of whether or not Bashar was merely serving to fulfill demands of existing regime power holders. However, it quickly became apparent that there was a real generational power shift as two thirds of the 60 most important regime posts were reappointed until 2003 (Abboud 2009: 17).

Once firmly settled in office, Bashar's leadership style and office shaping strategy nevertheless remained based on a gradual and mixed approach. In terms of domestic policymaking, he refused to engage in any fundamental political reform efforts, although an increased degree of media liberalization and the rise of civil society organizations pointed towards a tacit opening of Syrian society. In the economic field, he continued the gradual liberalization approach that had already prevailed under his father. Yet the degree of economic liberalization was significantly increased after 2005, underlining the drift in the higher echelons of the Syrian state class toward alliances with the new bourgeoisie. In foreign policymaking, Syria continued to belong to an axis of resistance with Iran and Hizballah in Lebanon. Bashar sustained pan-Arab nationalist

claims such as support for Palestinian rights and demands for Israel to return the Syrian Golan Heights. However, he also explored opportunities to improve the relationship with the U.S. and the European Union (EU). However, these efforts suffered from the fact that U.S. policymakers continued to focus on efforts to impose a pro-Israeli *Pax Americana* in the region rejecting any consideration of legitimate Arab and Syrian grievances (Hinnebusch 2009: 19).

In order to analyze Bashar's Presidency, the first part of this section illustrates the period with a timeline. The latter part section sums up the outcomes of his policies in the economic field and with regard to the reform of the Syrian political system. In terms of a timeline approach, the Presidency can be divided into the following stages: (1) the transition period from the time of assuming office until the U.S.-led occupation of neighboring Iraq (2000-2003); (2) the first phase of sustained external pressure when the U.S. threatened regime change from outside (2003-2005); (3) the second period of sustained pressure in which Syria was forced to withdraw its military presence in neighboring Lebanon in 2005; (4) the short stage of direct challenge of the axis of resistance during the border war between Israel and Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006; (5) the increased shift of the Syrian regime toward economic liberalization during the 10th Syrian Five Year Plan (2005-2010); (6) the

period between the beginning of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and the rise of public protests in Syria (2010-March 2011); and (7) the rapid deterioration of the Syrian domestic political situation beginning March 2011, with the beginning of the Syrian uprising and the consequent ongoing regime efforts to react with a combination of political reforms and repression.

Directly after entering office, the new president was greeted by a civil society movement with a leftist and liberal profile that was referred to as the ‘Damascus Spring’. This movement was primarily driven by intellectuals and demanded the abolition of the state of emergency, the release of political prisoners, and the introduction of a multi-party system in Syria. However, the intellectuals were unable to reach larger sections of the population or of the state class with their demands (Eckelt 2011a: 90). The movement was subsequently shut down by the security services at the end of 2001, and some people were arrested and tried in public courts for offences against national security laws. At the same time, the state did release some political prisoners and continued to tolerate some degree of liberal political activity. The issue of domestic democratization became sidelined, however, when the Anglo-American occupation of neighboring Iraq in 2003 resulted in the closure of ranks amongst the Syrian leadership and the Syrian population at large.

Between 2003 and 2005, the Syrian leadership appeared to be next on a list of U.S. military-sponsored regime change in the region and seemed to be in real danger to fall victim to a second U.S. military campaign. U.S. intervention in Iraq quickly triggered the full-scale breakdown of the Iraqi state along sectarian lines, and the high monetary and political cost of subsequent U.S. counterinsurgency efforts made it clear to the U.S. leadership that additional military campaigns were not advisable. From the point of view of the Syrian leadership, the collapse of the Iraqi state next door served as a warning that Syria might ‘turn into a second Iraq’. This fear was shared by the Syrian population at large and underlined by the presence of up to 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in the streets of Syria since the Syrian government had allowed Iraqi citizens to flee the sectarian war at home by opening the country’s borders for Iraqis. In this situation, large-scale public rallies were organized in the streets of Syria which focused on pro-Syrian, pro-government, and pro-stability messages. These rallies were a real political success for the Syrian government and were based on the fear that war could come to Syria at this point in time (Hinnebusch 2009: 23).

In 2005, the contestation between Syria and the U.S.-led coalition quickly switched from the border between Syria and Iraq toward neighboring Lebanon. Here, the assassination of

former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who was strongly linked with Saudi and French interests, on February 14, 2005 triggered the creation of a Franco-American coalition blaming Syria for the assassination and demanding (in UN Resolution 1559) the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. While a perpetrator has never been conclusively identified, Syria accepted that pressure to end its presence in Lebanon had become so severe that withdrawal of the Syrian troops was quickly concluded in May 2005. This withdrawal weakened the regional geopolitical role of Syria whose intervention in the Lebanese Civil War since 1976 had been tacitly accepted by the U.S., Israel, and other regional powers to avoid a security vacuum and to maintain a balance between the different political forces and sects in Lebanon. In 2006, Israel promptly engaged in a border war with the Hizballah militia in the south of Lebanon in order to weaken this Shiite-political movement with the view of disarming it. However, rather than producing a quick military defeat of Hizballah, the 34-day war was interpreted in the Arab world as a military draw and as a strategic success for the resistance axis to which Syria belonged. Thus, the period directly after the 2006 confrontation between Hizballah and Israel in Lebanon was probably the most successful point in Bashar's Presidency with regard to foreign policy. His alliance with Hizballah appeared to point to

a strong Syrian regional position regardless of the country's earlier withdrawal from Lebanon (Hinnebusch 2009: 20; Valbjørn and Bank 2012: 4-7).

What lessons did Bashar draw from the experiences with sustained U.S. pressure and the push against Syria's strategic position in Lebanon? On the one hand, one might observe efforts to 'construct multiple alliances, at both the regional and the international level, through which the pressure on Syria might be diluted and external resources accessed' (Hinnebusch 2009: 15). However, there was also another somehow contrary lesson: it appeared possible for Syria to punch above its weight in terms of resisting U.S.-led pressures due to the popularity of a resistance position in the Arab world. It also appeared possible for the axis of resistance to fully balance the conservative Gulf Arab countries. With the advantage of hindsight, this interpretation of the geopolitical potential of Syria was clearly too far-reaching since it underestimated the superior resource endowment of the conservative Arab Gulf States and their willingness to put these resources to use against Syria (and by extension against Iran) (Chivers and Schmitt 2013; Khalaf and Fielding-Smith 2013). Moreover, U.S. policymakers recovered to some extent from their lowest point after the Iraqi invasion (removing Saddam Hussein's Sunni-based regime had actually served to strengthen the power of Shiite Iran since the post-

Saddam Iraqi central government was principally Shiite). In fact, there are many indications that U.S. policymakers quietly remained committed to the project of regime change in Syria in the medium term (Hersh 2007).¹¹

Geopolitical issues aside, Syria also faced the need to reconsider domestic economic strategy. In the period after 2005, the international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, as well as various Syrian participants committed to liberal economics, claimed that Syria's prospects as a rentier state were rapidly deteriorating (IMF 2006). It was argued that, in order to deal with declining revenues from the oil sector, the government would have to cut state subsidies and the size of the public sector while allowing the private sector an economic leadership role in terms of attracting investment and creating jobs. This policy was put forward by those wishing to commit Syria to a free trade regime as advanced by the EU in the economic Association Agreements of the European Neighborhood Policy. The Agreement would have allowed EU countries after a short transition period full access to the Syrian market, including domestic services and Syrian government procurement, while outlawing any Syrian government subsidies for domestic public sector enterprises (Dostal 2008). However, such efforts to liberalize the economy were subject to challenges. Competition between economic liberalizers and advocates

of ‘corrective measures’ had already been apparent during the rule of Hafiz: this time around, the first coalition was described as ‘internationalist’ (consisting of traders, investors, and bankers), while the latter was termed as ‘nationalist-statist’ (consisting of the military, public sector, and other popular constituencies) (Ehteshami *et al.* 2013: 225).

These more recent developments once again underlined the fact that rentier state policymaking follows a similar logic over time. From the point of view of Bashar, the conflict had to be managed rather than decided upon in favor of one of the two constituencies. From what is known about Bashar’s own views about economic management, he favored a gradual approach based on the continuing existence of a public sector but an increased opening of the Syrian market for private sector investment. This compromise was formally presented in Syrian government discourse either as a shift to a ‘social market economy’ or as the ‘Chinese model’ in which the private sector was allowed to expand while the public sector was retained and reformed in parallel.

In any case, the Syrian shift toward a market economy suffered from various shortcomings that all worked to question the prospects of liberal reformers to firmly establish their hegemony. First, most domestic Syrian capitalists were not able to flourish in a genuine market or to compete with international

capital. Success instead depended on business connections with the government and upon ‘crony capitalism.’ The most well-known representative of the crony capitalists is Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of Bashar, who is in charge of many domestic business ventures such as Syria’s mobile phone network Syriatel. The efforts of ‘crony capitalists’ to create business linkages with international capital suffered, however, due to U.S.-led efforts to boycott and exclude them from business opportunities outside of Syria. Second, in order to attract international and especially Gulf Arab investment into Syria, the geopolitical conflict with Saudi Arabia and other countries worked as a barrier. Although Syria succeeded in attracting some investment and therefore extracted a small share from the proceedings of the latest oil boom, this investment was mostly focused on a narrow luxury sector such as high-end hotels and luxury goods.¹² Third, in terms of actual structural opening of the economy, Syria did allow increasing access of Turkish business interests into Syria, and this immediately threatened the competitiveness of Syrian domestic producers, such as in the textiles sector. In summary, the Syrian shift toward private-sector driven growth did not solve the structural problems of the rentier economy in crisis because the private sector’s ability to create new jobs and to replace the economic activities of the public sector remained too limited.

The ‘nationalist-statist’ interests and ‘corrective wing’ representatives from the public sector still had to be accommodated by the regime. The most crucial political economy question was to what extent the state would continue to procure enough resources to satisfy the social interests of all factions of the state class. New rent income could be mobilized or, alternatively, real cuts could be enforced in the government budget to improve government finances by means of austerity. However, any sophisticated quantitative examination of these issues would have to rely on up-to-date trustworthy data sources that are largely absent in the case of Syria. One can therefore only advance analysis based on stylized facts.

As for the state’s rent income and its distribution, it has been suggested that Syrian society ‘appears to form a pyramid made up of different layers of rentiers, in which broader layers of the population further down profit less and less from the national rent income’ (Eckelt 2011b). In this sense, one must analyze how public sector salaries compare to the cost of living over time and what kind of state subsidies are made available for those Syrians who do not have access to employment in the public sector. This analysis must take into account that public sector employment is only offered to approx. 20 percent of the adult population.¹³ In addition, public sector employment is biased in terms of limiting access to the more highly educated

sectors of the population with intermediate and university-level degrees, therefore reinforcing existing social cleavages (Buckner and Saba 2010: 88-89). Outside of the public sector, state subsidization of staple foods, petrol, and heating gas forms the only generally available social policy and one that has historically been the core part of the social contract in order to protect the population from extreme poverty. Replacing such policies with more targeted anti-poverty programs is difficult or impossible due to the limited administrative capabilities of the Syrian state. Indeed, any attack on these general subsidies has historically been associated with large-scale discontent in most Arab countries.

It is therefore not surprising that Syrian state policy continued to be based on compromise with public sector interests. The early period of Bashar's Presidency before 2003 enjoyed a windfall gain from oil revenues due to Iraqi oil transfer payments—a policy adopted to undermine U.S. sanctions against Iraqi oil sales. However, the share of oil income in Syrian government revenue, according to government sources, subsequently declined from 58 percent in 2001 to 27 percent at the end of the decade (Al-Thawra, quoted in Memrieconomicblog 2010).¹⁴ The initial increase in income had produced job growth in the public sector, but the rapid subsequent decline prompted questions regarding all government spending pro-

grams, and most government decisions since then concerned cuts or full-scale removal of subsidies. For example, the agricultural price guarantees that distributed some of Syria's oil income to rural constituencies while also controlling the prices for urban consumers were cut from 3.7 percent to 2 percent of GDP between 2000 and 2005 and the price subsidies for staple foods, petrol, and diesel all declined incrementally. On the other hand, full-scale privatization of public sector enterprise was avoided and the public sector was frequently compensated for rising prices by parallel increases in public sector wages.

To sum up the economic situation, one needs to stress that the decision of the state to protect its own core constituency against the effects of inflation was not sufficient to maintain social peace. Rural areas in particular were hit hard by economic reform and cuts in subsidies, also falling victim to a long period of drought. While liberal government reformers under the managerial leadership of former deputy prime minister for economic affairs Abdullah al-Dardari tried to spread the message that flat-rate general subsidies were too expensive to be maintained, arguing that targeted welfare and a social safety net should replace the existing system, the actual development on the ground was to enforce cuts without previous introduction of adequate side payments. However one interprets these developments, one must appreciate that policy still remained within

the framework of the rentier state: in particular, the liberal reformers were politically controlled and quietly left the stage when the domestic political order started to break down in 2011. Entering crisis mode, the regime immediately appointed prominent representatives of the ‘corrective wing’ such as Qadri Jamil, a former Communist and current leader of a minor leftist opposition party in the Syrian parliament, to take over the position formerly held by al-Dardari. In short, the political initiative was recaptured by the ‘nationalist-statist’ wing of the regime in its fight for survival (this is further discussed below).¹⁵

Turning to analysis of the political leadership of Bashar before the 2011 crisis, the general impression was that the regime and government were united. Serious challenges to Bashar’s leadership did not occur in public.¹⁶ Some minor adjustments of the formal political system occurred. For example, the SSNP, which had not previously been a legal political party in Syria, was recognized and subsequently joined the NPF. It became clear that the former competitors for power after the independence of Syria (i.e. the Baath Party, SSNP, and SCP) were drawn more closely together. What was problematic, on the other hand, was the actual conduct of regime policy outside of the formal political system. Here, the apparent acceptance of Bashar’s leadership was paid for by the delegation

of authority and autonomy to other prominent regime stakeholders. Crucially, effective steering of the regime was difficult according to Bashar's own opinion: 'We have a lot of ideas, but we do not know how to implement them. We issue laws, but we do not implement them. I issue a decree and the government should implement it, but now I have to follow up on everything all the time' (Assad, quoted in Lesch 2005: 200). There is, of course, nothing peculiarly Syrian about the problem of government coordination; although the general impression of the Syrian state under Bashar's leadership was that he tasked different people with different (and often contradictory) projects while overall coordinative capabilities were rather weak. Once again, this is typical of a rentier state in which different factions of the state class advance mutually contradictory social and political objectives.

5. The crisis in Syria since 2011

The so-called Arab Spring started off with the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, and ended, for the time being, with the Egyptian military coup that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power on July 3, 2013. Initially, Syria appeared to be unaffected by events that led to multiple rounds of regime change in some other Arab countries such as Egypt,

Libya and Tunisia. In the period before March 2011, the Syrian government claimed that the internal opposition was completely unable to mobilize in the streets due to the close linkages between the regime and the people. Once the unarmed and armed opposition groups succeeded in a certain degree of mobilization, the regime responded with a combination of repressive measures and counter-mobilization based on a series of defiant speeches of Bashar (four speeches each in 2011 and 2012 given on symbolically important days and within significant venues such as the Syrian parliament, the University of Damascus, and on the occasion of army day).

Most of Bashar's speeches were subsequently followed by state-sponsored pro-regime mobilization waves that went underreported or were ignored in the Western media.¹⁷ These pro-government rallies took place in all major cities and amounted in all likelihood to the largest political manifestations in Syria's history. The motivation of participants was at least partially due to many Syrian people's intention to avoid a further escalation of violence. It should be stressed that the government-sponsored rallies in 2011 and 2012 were similar to those that had taken place during the period when the U.S. administration of George W. Bush had threatened with imposed regime change from outside after 2003. Once again, many Syrians rallied around the government since the alternatives were

considered to be worse rather than better. There was certainly a strong element of support for President Bashar al-Assad and for Syrian state nationalism. The regime speakers and Bashar himself stressed the foreign policy stance of Syria, a stance characterized by a support for Palestine and a desire to regain the Golan Heights. In this context, Bashar asserted that the opposition was sponsored and armed by external powers, especially the U.S., Turkey, and conservative Arab Gulf states, in order to punish Syria for the long-term policy of resisting U.S. and Israeli objectives. While the pro-government rallies certainly did not restore the authority of the regime to speak on behalf of all Syrians, they did show that the regime still enjoyed some degree of legitimacy.

The next step involved Bashar beginning to talk about domestic political reform. Two projects were discussed and rapidly implemented, namely the introduction of a new constitution to replace the 1973 Syrian constitution and a new party law that would be followed by the election of a new Parliament. These projects were put forward at a relatively early stage of the crisis (for example, the idea of a new party law was first mentioned by Bashar in a speech on April 16, 2011). As a result of the rapid escalation of the crisis and the steady increase of violence in the streets, the two reform projects failed, however, to trigger a genuine political dialogue beyond gov-

ernment circles. They were, therefore, based on formulae of compromise within the state class and amounted to reforms from above.

The single most significant element of the reforms was certainly the new draft constitution. This document tried to satisfy the demands of different constituencies: gradual changes were offered in combination with reassurances for existing power holders. The most noteworthy change was the removal of the old article 8 of the 1973 constitution that had defined the Baath Party as the ‘leading force in the society and the state’ (ICL project, no date: article 8). Instead, Syria’s political system is now supposed to ‘be based on the principle of political pluralism, and exercising power democratically through the ballot box’ (SANA 2012: article 8). Yet this transfer to a multi-party system is not matched by an expansion of the legislative powers of the Syrian parliament. The new 2012 constitution still defines parliament as a reactive body tasked to deliberate over proposals deriving from the president and the prime minister. However, there was a subtle upgrading of the role of parliament in regards to the nomination process for the presidency. Here, the new constitution demands that presidential candidates must first receive the support of at least 35 members of parliament and no parliamentarian is allowed to support more than one candidate at the same time. In addition, the new constitu-

tion appears to demand that there should be at least two candidates for the office of president in any future election (SANA 2012: article 85(5)).¹⁸

As far as the all-important institution of the presidency is concerned, the exceptionally strong authorities granted by the old constitution have been maintained. The president still appoints the government and continues to forward his own draft laws to parliament for approval. Although the new constitution limits the exercise of the presidency to two single terms of seven years, this new time limit starts only with the next presidential election in 2014. The constitution allows this election to be delayed in the case of national emergency. It follows that Bashar could theoretically seek re-election in 2014 and 2021 and could remain in office (if elected) until 2028. The role of the prime minister and of the government remains practically unchanged in the new constitution, since the president still directly appoints both. As for the judiciary, the new constitution slightly expands the rights of the Syrian Supreme Constitutional Court since the new article 146(5) allows for the first time trials of the president in cases of high treason. However such a law is unlikely to be used, given that the president appoints all members of the Supreme Constitutional Court (article 141).¹⁹ One could understand the new provisions as a symbolic

endorsement of the idea of a division of judicial and executive powers—although these are certainly very weak.

Crucially, the new constitution retains article 3 of the 1973 constitution, an article that states that the president of Syria must be a Muslim. However the new constitutional oath of office (article 7) drops the reference to ‘unity, freedom, and socialism’ that defined the rule of the Baath Party in the 1973 document. Moreover, the 2012 constitution no longer makes any reference to socialism, a difference that could possibly be interpreted as a symbolic endorsement of the demands of economic liberalizers. Last but not least, the new constitution endorses a multi-party system, but continues to outlaw political parties formed on ‘religious, sectarian, tribal, [class-based], regional, or professional basis’ (SANA 2012: article 8(4)).²⁰ This emphasizes the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups remain banned under the new constitution. There is also scope to outlaw various other political parties such as Kurdish nationalists and class-based and/or professional parties. Lastly, the new constitution requires that at least 50 percent of members of Parliament must be from the ‘worker and peasant social classes’ (SANA 2012: article 60(2)). This provision underlines a continuing commitment toward ‘class-based’ parliamentary legitimacy that appears to be in conflict with some of the other constitutional provisions. On February 26,

2012, the new constitution was endorsed by a majority of Syrians in a referendum. According to the official results, the new constitution was supported by 89.4 percent of the voters on a turnout of 57.4 percent of the electorate (quoted according to Direct Democracy 2012).²¹

Because its constitutional status as a ‘leading force’ was abolished, it might appear as if the only group within the Syrian state class that lost out in the new constitution was the Baath Party. Yet even it enjoyed some gains in the sense that the new constitution demanded a new parliamentary election under the new multi-party system within 90 days. This time frame was too short for new parties to organize and campaign in a serious manner. While there was a steep increase in the number of registered parties, the electoral system, based on 15 multi-seat regional constituencies, clearly favored large coalitions. As a result, the number of Baath Party members in the new parliament, elected on May 7, 2012, on a 51.3 percent turnout of the electorate according to official figures, was higher than before. The Baath Party gained 134 seats out of 250 and the organization’s alliance with the NPF parties added further to the Baath-led parliamentary bloc. The fact that the overwhelming majority of opposition forces did not participate in the election left only one leftist opposition alliance, the ‘Popular Front for Change and Liberation’ to contest the election, and it gained

five seats. A third of the seats went to independent candidates—as had already been the case pre-reform—while only one of the other eleven new parties received a single seat (Ahmad Kousa for the Syrian Democratic Party). Thus, the Baath Party enjoyed a higher share of representation in the new Parliament than before and the multi-party system did not really take off in any substantial way.

Any serious evaluation of the reform program in its current form (i.e. the 2012 reform policies based on the new constitution and the new parliament) must conclude that it is too limited in scope to offer those sections of the opposition willing to negotiate with the government a real stake in policymaking. In particular, the 2012 constitution severely limits the field of presidential candidates insofar as it requires at least 35 members of Parliament to support any candidate in writing. No political party other than the Baath Party under the leadership of Bashar currently fulfills the criteria of assembling 35 members of Parliament. Under the current rules, one might imagine that there would be two more potentially feasible candidates (one based on an alliance of Socialist Unionists (18 seats in Parliament) and other leftists and one based on a candidate backed by economic liberalizers). However, there would be serious question marks behind each of these candidacies, and all other opposition groups would essentially remain excluded. In this

context, the seemingly innocent article 153 of the new constitution, which states that no amendments of the new constitution are possible before the passing of 18 months, means that the state could run the 2014 presidential elections without any reconsideration of the way in which presidential candidates would be selected. That this constitutes a problem that severely limits the scope for dialogue with the opposition appears by now to be accepted by Bashar himself. In a speech delivered on January 6, 2013, he suggested a new national dialogue that should result in concluding a national pact. This process would in effect entail another new constitution, new party law, and new parliamentary elections (SANA 2013). How these suggestions relate to the issue of the next presidential elections remains unclear and would in any case depend on the results of a forthcoming Syrian national dialogue.

What new lessons can be drawn about the nature of the Syrian state after three years of sustained crisis? Syria has always been a relatively weak rentier state due to the limited amount of oil revenues. By now, it could be argued that Syria has completely stopped being a rentier state, at least as far as the oil revenues are concerned. Initially, this was due to the decision of the EU in early 2012 to boycott Syria economically by stopping the oil imports. This immediately weakened the resources base of the Syrian state to a large extent since Syrian

exports to the EU in 2011—the last year of normal economic relations—consisted to more than 84 percent of ‘mineral fuels’ (oil and oil-related products) while some 94 percent of all Syrian oil exports went to EU member states, principally Germany, France, and Italy (DG Trade 2012: 7; EIA 2011: 3). This high degree of Syrian dependency on oil revenues from just three EU member states meant that the Syrian state was under pressure to immediately procure alternative sources of income at the cost of facing severe economic crisis. (In the meantime, the devastation of much of the country through war and economic sabotage has destroyed the revenue base of the state and the livelihood of ordinary Syrians.)

Nevertheless, politics cannot be reduced to economics, and the unity of the Syrian state class has essentially been maintained. The degree of internal stability of the state class (and to some extent of the state) is symbolized by Bashar’s public speeches in front of constituencies supporting the regime and by his regular participation in Muslim religious holidays during which he is accompanied by the moderate Sunni religious leaders of Syria. Whether or not Bashar and the Syrian state class will continue to sustain the state depends of course on economic and political factors that are yet to be settled. As for the prospects of political reform, the current balance of forces suggests that there is a conflict at the national (Syrian),

regional (Arab), and global level. Each of these levels interacts with the others and even if a balance could be reached at every single level, the conflict would nevertheless continue for a long time.

Last but not least, the question of dialogue between the Syrian regime and the domestic opposition is certainly crucial. Nevertheless, these deliberations will not end the crisis as long as Arab and global actors do not support it. International observers must by now appreciate that the Syrian opposition is highly fragmented, that transnational Islamist and terrorist networks are operating in Syria, and that externally sponsored groups of opposition leaders compete with each other as much as they do with the Syrian government. At present, some domestic opposition groups can be distinguished for their willingness to support the government in the current crisis. These groups consist of elements of the SSNP, SCP, and other leftist factions. They entered the political reform process in 2011 and 2012, and some representatives subsequently became part of the current Syrian government. A second moderate opposition group, also made up of leftist, centrist, and secular democratic parties, has formed the 'National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change'. This group is in principle willing to negotiate with the Syrian government and has stressed that they are against any outside intervention of NATO countries in Syria.

They have warned that ‘militarization means political and financial dependency on the military opposition, the marginalization of democratic forces, and the reinforcement of sectarian extremist and black Islamism groups: Black like oil, black like darkness and black like exclusion’ (Manna 2012).

Beyond these minor moderate opposition groups, however, the Syrian insurgency consist by now of at least 1,000 armed group with around 100,000 fighters—the overwhelming number of them Islamists rather than secular nationalists—and at least half a dozen opposition leadership bodies (IHS 2013). These two sets of insurgency organizations are only loosely coupled and they all compete with each other for support, funding and patronage at the local, regional, and global level.

In this context, peaceful political activity of any kind is at present nearly impossible in Syria: it is no longer possible to find out what ordinary Syrians might think about the crisis; nor, indeed, does it seem to matter much as the country suffers from a general breakdown of civil society triggered by a mechanical upgrading of the forces of violence in the context of a global geopolitical power contest. This conflict by proxy is not the fault of ordinary Syrians: they are paying the price for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the context of hope for democracy in the Arab world, the events in Syria underline how dangerous it is to expect proxy conflicts to open the door

to democracy. On the contrary, the Arab Gulf countries, the most authoritarian regimes in the region, appear to export their own version of authoritarianism toward more secular and tolerant societies such as Syria.

Conclusion

The point of departure of this paper has been to question how political science theory can contribute to the analysis of the domestic and international factors behind the Syrian crisis. In this concluding section, each of the five theoretical perspectives, i.e. (1) populist authoritarianism; (2) sectarianism; (3) rentier state theory; (4) neo-Gramscian approach in international relations; and (5) classical geopolitical thought are briefly reviewed in the light of the previous empirical discussion. Most importantly, each of the theoretical schools is useful in explaining the Syrian case; yet no single analytical perspective should be elevated above any other. It is only by combining different theories and qualitative and quantitative approaches that one can start to appreciate the many complex power relationships that have since March 2011 triggered a crisis of Syrian statehood. Qualitative research has to be respected, since a solid data base for quantitative research is often absent in the Syrian case.²²

Firstly, populist authoritarianism helps understanding the power resources of the Syrian state class. The core issue is whether the state class can continue to act as a unified actor and whether it remains possible to sustain the domestic social patronage that in the past helped to unite different social and regional segments of Syrian society. Thus, the theory of populist authoritarianism highlights the fact that the state class must necessarily sustain social coalitions with popular sectors or face an existential crisis of its leadership. In addition, the theory also suggests that the stability and scope of domestic social coalitions directly determine the country's geopolitical strength. Conversely, efforts of sections of the state class to engage in liberalization of the economy and the subsequent socio-economic abandonment of former regime constituencies might trigger domestic disturbances questioning regime stability. Lastly, one could also use the theory to explain why Syria is linked in its geopolitical alliances with certain other countries that are also driven by different versions of populist authoritarianism, such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. These states have little in common; yet they all share a reliance on rent income and have all made efforts to integrate popular sectors based on some version of state-led social reform.

Secondly, the analytical focus on sectarianism and weak statehood might also add to an understanding of the Syri-

an case. The current crisis certainly increases sectarianism and threatens to break society along sectarian lines as happened in neighboring Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003. Thus, the Syrian ethnic and religious minorities certainly have no incentive to support those sectors of the opposition that are sponsored by outside powers. Nevertheless, the analytical focus on sectarianism does not explain why the crisis of the Syrian state occurs now. In fact, there exists no serious domestic demand in Syria to solve the current crisis by splitting the country into ethnically homogenous smaller states.²³ For one thing, this would not be possible in most areas of Syria, and the resulting small states would inevitably fall under the influence of neighboring countries and lack any long-term viability. Moreover, any division of Syria would encourage similar projects elsewhere. Thus, one must stress that many actors within Syria have consciously maintained a Syrian national unity position. For example, Syrian religious leaders from all denominations have stressed their determination to defend Syrian statehood and unity. One therefore needs to stress that Syria's religious and ethnic diversity could still add to a new Syrian nationalism that is accommodating rather than divisive and sectarian.

Thirdly, this paper has focused heavily on theories of the rentier state and the state class as advanced by Elsenhans, Eckelt, and other authors. The advantage of this particular theo-

retical perspective is to demonstrate that Syria is not a unique case in the international system. Rather, many of the shortcomings of Syrian statehood are shared with rentier states in other parts of the world. In addition, the two theories of the rentier state and of populist authoritarianism mutually support each other. Both theories highlight the need for the Syrian state class to sustain a sufficient degree of rent income in order to maintain domestic stability. In the Syrian case, the fact is that oil revenues are at the lower end of what is usually understood to be the minimum threshold of a rentier economy. Nevertheless, rentier state theory also holds that a country can replace oil rents with political and strategic rents. In the future, the Syrian state class must certainly explore new revenue opportunities in order to restore the country's economic foundations. Perhaps, Syria will still be able to gain new rent income from the development of currently untouched gas resources located along the country's Mediterranean coast and/or from revenue-producing pipeline projects linking Iranian oil fields with Iraq, Syria, and the Mediterranean Sea (or, alternatively, plans to link Syria and Iran with China). In theory, an improvement of relations with EU states could also be pursued. Yet the EU's past unwillingness to provide substantial assistance has forced the Syrian state class to look for more promising alternatives elsewhere. This has resulted in recent efforts to 'go east' toward China or

to link up with regional neighboring states such as Turkey (in the latter case certainly a full-scale failure). Another major problem of the Syrian state class is that most of the country's close allies tend to have similar economic profiles; thus Syria has little bargaining power in terms of dealing with other rentier countries. As for China, Syria currently only serves as an export market for Chinese products although China, as a non-rentier state, could in principle offer a promising future market for Syrian oil and gas. At present, the Syrian state class relies heavily on Iran as a close geopolitical ally. Yet this will not keep the Syrian economy afloat indefinitely. The state class requires a long-term social and developmental project that would offer credible prospects for the social advancement of large shares of the Syrian population. In the past, this was occasionally a feasible proposition, but the current state of Syria is far removed from offering any such prospects.

Fourthly, the neo-Gramscian approach highlights how the crisis of the Syrian state class relates to global hegemony and the distribution of class power in the international system. This concerns the conflict within the Syrian state class between economic liberalizers on the one hand and public sector constituencies on the other. The question is whether the state class acquires most of its economic and political power from its control of the state and from domestic resources or, alternatively,

from mediating between the demands of international capital and local constituencies. In other words, is the state class able to act autonomously, as suggested by concepts of populist authoritarianism and rentier state theory, or is it rather bound by alliances with outside capital interests in which it must submit to more powerful forces? The example of the Syrian regime's 'crony capitalists' is a case in point. This group, deriving from within the regime, has always stressed that they would like to be treated like 'ordinary businesses' in the international arena. However, they faced boycott by the U.S. and EU, which underlines that the crony capitalists, too, were unable to overcome the power limits of the Syrian state class. Although the latter is strong in the exercise of political and economic power at home, it is extremely weak and without any credible bargaining power outside of the Syrian national territory. In addition, neo-Gramscian approaches can also help to highlight a broader structural crisis of the state in developing societies. Here, the international system, with its asymmetric power relations between the center and the periphery, severely curtails the agency of any kind of political leadership in developing societies. The rise of political Islam is itself one outcome of this long-term structural crisis that was earlier encountered by secular nationalist elites when they proved unable to satisfy popular expectations. The case of the short-term Muslim Brotherhood

government in Egypt until 2013 underlines how Islamist forces also remain bound by the limits of weak statehood and a structural dependency on international capital. Indeed, any future Syrian leadership will essentially face similar economic challenges—challenges that do not differ much from those the current government has to deal with in terms of choices of national development model.

Fifthly, the Syrian crisis must also be analyzed from the point of view of classical geopolitical thought. Here, one must appreciate that Bashar's leadership between 2000 and 2011 appeared to U.S. policymakers as a permanent provocation. A case in point was the 2010 meeting between Bashar and the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in which the former criticized the 'new situation of colonialism' while the latter suggested that '[t]he whole U.S. government has no impact whatsoever on regional relations' and 'should pack their things and leave' (CNN 2010; Schneider 2010). For U.S. regional strategists, the main concern has in fact been to put pressure on an Iran that is considered the main opponent of U.S. objectives in the region. In this context, Syria is seen as little more than another pressure point, and Syrian affairs are considered undistinguishable from the broader agenda of pushing back the axis of resistance. This has always been stated openly in the U.S. foreign policy discourse (Byman, Doran *et al.* 2012).²⁴ The be-

havior of the anti-Syrian coalition in the Arab world can therefore be explained with various political and economic interests, such as control of oil, gas, and pipeline rights. Thus, the global context of the Syrian crisis relates on the one hand to the issue of U.S. unilateral control and on the other to the alternative scenario of a more multipolar world order with an upgraded regional and global role for Russia, China, and other countries. Looking at the current state of the Syrian crisis, one might suggest that the U.S. have already achieved the major goal of turning Syria into a weak state.

Of course, one could also interpret the current situation as characterized by a new balance of power at the domestic Syrian level (the government essentially continues to function due to assistance from Iran and Russia while the insurgency is also maintained by outside powers), the regional Arab level (the Sunni states, Turkey, and the Shia states all suffer from domestic disturbances to various degrees that make further escalation of the Syrian crisis even more dangerous), and the global level (Russia and China move slowly toward a more assertive posture in terms of their relationship with U.S. policymakers). These are all issues beyond the scope of this paper. One might simply conclude that the current situation has underlined how contested the Greater Middle East remains and how

little EU member states have been able to assert any objectives on their own.

Lastly, how could the Syrian crisis be solved at the domestic and international level? There is no doubt that the shortcomings of the Syrian state do relate to the fact that the principle of ‘winner-takes-all’ structures the entire political system. The all-powerful institution of the Syrian Presidency and the lack of power of the other formal political institutions and of civil society mean that Syria cannot currently be stabilized by way of power sharing. It is certainly the case that reforms of the formal institutions, allowing for a rebalancing of political authority and increasing degrees of power sharing, could open the way to create a more democratic and more accountable system. In this context, the tools of consociational democracy (Lijphart 2012) could help to slowly transform the Syrian state and could bridge the deep cleavages in Syrian society over a longer period of time based on the principle of power sharing and the protection of minorities. Yet democracy is not going to come to Syria in a single step. Any credible prospect for democracy would require an end to the geopolitical contest over Syria, and an opportunity for the domestic actors to mutually engage with each other in order to allow national reconciliation and the building of trust. There is little hope at present due to the sustained escalation of violence that has hor-

rified most Syrians and makes some militants believe that one more effort is going to break the opponent. However, this logic is the greatest obstacle to democracy in Syria and the region. Thus, the need to agree on a negotiated settlement in Syria is beyond doubt and cannot be achieved by violent means.

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Endnotes

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² Conversely, it is necessary to ‘take into consideration that there is no clear sectarian dichotomy in Syrian society, dividing the country into Alawis and non-Alawis. Syria has never been ruled by “the Alawi community” as such’ (Dam 2011b).

³ All translations from German-language sources are by the author.

⁴ According to Elsenhans, ‘public sector employees differ from other client groups of the state class in growing as of necessity in parallel with the rise in importance of the state class. They differ from the other client groups of the state class that can change in accordance with different economic strategies.... [E]mployees in the public sector are the “organic clients” of the state class....’ (1981: 122, see also 23-24, 121).

⁵ There is a danger to overextend the theory of the rentier state to include states that enjoy primarily political and strategic rents. For example, Israel could be considered as a rentier states because of its privileged economic relationship with the U.S.A. However, such expansive use of the theory, including patron-client relationships, ignores the direct analytical link with resource-based extraction of rent income.

⁶ The Carter Doctrine of 23 January 1980 (inspired by Zbigniew Brzezinski) once again explicitly stated that the U.S. would consider any threat to its geopolitical position in the Middle East as a legitimate reason to use military force. This has been reiterated by Obama in his UN speech on 24 September 2013 stating that ‘[t]he United States of America is pre-

pared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region' (Washington Post 2013).

⁷ Notionally, the Syrian Baath Party still maintains a National and a Regional [i.e. Syrian] Command. However, the Regional Command is in fact the actual party leadership body. (This paper does not discuss the case of the Iraqi Baath Party.)

⁸ The 'Corrective Movement' led by Hafiz al-Assad assumed power in 1970, and Assad became the Syrian president in 1971.

⁹ In addition, Syrian labor migration to richer Arab countries such as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia allowed access to remittance payments. These payments improved the economic situation of many Syrian families.

¹⁰ Parliamentary powers to supervise the national budget are limited in scope and parliament is 'not to engage in comprehensive control of the executive, especially not of the president who can dissolve parliament at any point The [parliamentary] veto power as regards presidential degrees was de facto not used' (Eckelt 2011a: 53).

¹¹ The account of Hersh is a significant source explaining how the second George W. Bush administration's 'redirection' (Hersh) of regional policy, lining up U.S. objectives with Sunni states and constituencies against Shiite power in the region, continues to inform the strategy of the Obama administration.

¹² In terms of establishing private capital as an influential player in Syrian domestic affairs, these investments were nevertheless of some significance because they allowed the construction of direct links between Syrian and external capital interests—potentially bypassing the mediating role of the state class (Eckelt 2011a: 116).

¹³ The actual size of Syrian government employment depends on how one conceptualizes the different categories such as central government, non-central government, education, health, public enterprise, and the armed forces. In fact, only some of

these groups enjoy privileges that have historically been associated with the Syrian concept of public sector employment.

¹⁴ Similar figures are given in a second source stating that ‘in 2003, some 51% of government revenue came from oil receipts, an amount equal to 20% of GDP and 58% of exports.... [I]n 2008 oil-related revenues accounted for 26.6% of total revenue, or just half of the level from five years previous. The IMF estimates that the 2010 figure is likely to be around 25%’ (Oxford Business Group 2011: 94).

¹⁵ In turn, Jamil was dismissed from his post on 29 September 2013 for ‘activities outside the nation without coordinating with the government’, according to Syrian state TV. The office of deputy prime minister for economic affairs has been left vacant since then.

¹⁶ Some observers interpreted the retirement of the Syrian Vice President and last prominent representative of the old guard Abdul Halim Khaddam during the 2005 Baath Party conference as a sign of internal discontent. Khaddam had held his position since 1984 and, following his retirement, left for France where he started to link up with the Muslim Brotherhood in exile to form a ‘National Salvation Front’. By then, he had lost his influence in Syria but it was speculated at the time that the political significance of his retirement might have to do with the defeat of a ‘pro-Saudi’ wing in the Syrian leadership that was closely related to the Syrian presence in Lebanon (Salloukh 2009).

¹⁷ For example, large pro-regime rallies took place across Syria on November 28, 2011, January 11, 2012, and March 15, 2012. Perhaps one in four adult Syrians attended these rallies.

¹⁸ Indeed, the new constitution is hazy on this point as it demands in article 85 that the speaker of parliament ‘should call for fresh nominations’ if only a single candidate meets the condition of enjoying the support of ‘at least 35 members’ of parliament. In this context, it is unclear whether or not the word ‘should’ demands at least two presidential candidates. On the

other hand, article 86(2) suggests that the presidential election must be competitive.

¹⁹ In an interesting twist, the official SANA English-language translation remains ambiguous as for the right of the president to appoint *all* members of the Supreme Court while an alternative version of the translation states that this is in fact the case (Qordoba 2012).

²⁰ In another twist in the English-language translation of the new constitution, the term ‘class-based’ is included in the official SANA translation but missing in the unofficial Qordoba translation.

²¹ There was no independent monitoring of the referendum and no voting took place in those parts of Syria that were under the control of the insurgents.

²² For example, some analysts suggest that the political stability of rentier states depends on reaching a certain minimum threshold of rent income (Basedau and Lay 2009), and that Syria does therefore not qualify for stable statehood. However, there is no absolute rule, since the same analysts hold that rich Bahrain is bound to enjoy political stability, even though that stability recently had to be reinforced by Saudi tanks.

²³ For example, Kurdish minority rights and autonomy in Syria would not be advanced by forming a small new state. Such new entity would certainly suffer from threats of neighboring states, especially Turkey. Most Syrian Kurdish political leaders therefore demand a higher degree of autonomy within Syria and have avoided any association with the armed opposition. They have so far largely succeeded in protecting Kurdish regions in Syria from the hostilities elsewhere. This also applies in a similar manner to the areas settled by the Druze minority.

²⁴ Denis McDonough, the U.S. advisor on Syria with ‘perhaps the closest ties to Mr. Obama’ has ‘questioned how much it was in America’s interest to tamp down the violence in Syria.’ He has ‘argued that the status quo in Syria could keep Iran pinned down for years’ and ‘suggested that a fight in Syria be-

tween Hezbollah and Al Qaeda would work to America's advantage,' according to Congressional officials (Mazzetti *et al.*, 2013).