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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Department of Political Science

Master's Thesis

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Strategy of Survival: The Resilience of the Assad Regime

Master's thesis

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Declaration

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In Prague on 27 July 2021 Eline Beijsens

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Abstract

The case of Syria presents an example of a regime performing authoritarian norms of peacebuilding that is indicative of new forms of geographical power implementing alternative models of post-conflict order. Bashar al-Assad utilises authoritarian conflict management to intensify its strategy of binary othering on which to exercise sectarian-infused practices of discrimination and violence to consolidate its power and subsequent legitimacy. The process of authoritarian upgrading left the Assad regime with vulnerabilities that were exploited during the uprising in 2011. Unable to control the protests, Assad intensified authoritarian and illiberal practices as a means to manage the civil war that emerged. Through discursive, spatial and economic practices, Assad was able to retain his seat of power. For example, drawing upon sectarianism as a tool of control, Assad put into place a process of binary othering that classifies citizens as loyal or disloyal. Citizens deemed disloyal are punished through a variety of measures. The authoritarian practices have led to dire conditions for the Syrian people, and are becoming entrenched into very structure of society through the process of reconstruction. However, liberal forms of peacebuilding lack the leverage to counter these practices.

Keywords

Syria; Civil War; Assad; Authoritarian Conflict Management; Reconstruction

Title

Strategy of Survival: the Resilience of the Assad Regime

Název práce

Strategie přežití: Rezilience Assadova režimu

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Introduction

The international community's (see generally, Jacques, 2006) putative plan for a Syria without President Bashar al-Assad at the helm has failed to attain its intended outcome. Presidential elections held in the Syrian Arab Republic on May 26 this year led to a 95 per cent win of the vote in favour of a fourth seven-year term by Assad (Swilam & Dahan, 2021), extending the duration of the Assad family's rule to almost six decades. Syrian officials reported that 78.6 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots, a number nearing 13.5 million people (Aljasem, 2021). However, the number of total eligible voters was set at 18 million people, according to the Interior Minister, Mohammad Khaled el-Rahmoun, which included Syrian citizens currently abroad (Aljasem, 2021). The above figures have been deemed improbable by Western critics, who hold that many supposedly eligible voters would not have been able to cast their ballots because they either lived outside of regime-controlled areas or were barred from voting by leaving the country without obtaining an exit stamp on their passports (Ajasem, 2021). Furthermore, the election was held outside of a United Nations-led peace process (SC Res 2254, 2015). Whilst international observers from Belarus and Russia were present, the legitimacy of the election has been called into question, notably by the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, and Italy for not being free nor fair.

However, questions of legitimacy have been consistent since the Ba'ath Party took power by way of a coup in 1963. Assad's government holds that the election demonstrates the country is returning to normal despite more than ten years of civil war. In a televised address, Assad spoke of how those who had voted in the election had brought back the true meaning of revolution: "you have saved its reputation and relaunched it" (Swilam &

Dahan, 2021). When contrasted with the content of earlier speeches given in 2011, this signals a continuation of Assad's narrative that 'saboteurs' are co-opting the legitimate demands by the Syrian people for reform and thereby disrupting stability (Friedman, 2011). Holding on to this narrative (Gaber, 2020), alongside other mechanisms, has allowed Assad the plausible deniability necessary to remain, albeit unsteadily so, at the helm of the country. The elections thus prove symbolic, representative of the resilience of Assad's power and a step towards the forced solidification of his power and control, regardless of its perceived legitimacy in the eyes of others.

The attempt at a re-entrenchment of power is a direct projection to other states and intergovernmental organisations, such as the UN, indicating a low intensity or even post-conflict phase to the civil war. However, this projection, supported with plans for reconstruction by the Syrian government, should not necessarily be construed as an end to the revolution. Whilst this show of strength indicates that Assad is changing his course of action, the direction of this course points to a continuation of violence and suppression. Whilst patterns of change and continuity are present within the mechanisms exploited by Assad; no post-conflict phase exists to demarcate the trauma experienced by the Syrian people. Those intervening in the conflict should be aware of this change and adapt their response accordingly. This is particularly pertinent concerning the issue of reconstruction, as the current trajectory breaks away from preconceived notions surrounding the idea of liberal peace. Instead, an exclusionary peace is taking form that reflects the current contested state of the international order.

A non-linear peace process presents challenges for outside support for reconstruction efforts. Whilst the Assad regime has prepared for reconstruction projects as early as 2012

(Imady, 2019, p. 14), it is ramping up its efforts and courting outside funding. Efforts so far, however, have not been without significant ramifications, especially for those not as deemed loyal supporters of Assad and those who fled or were displaced and are thus deemed disloyal (Abboud, 2020, p.14). Authoritarian practices have seeped into the reconstruction process in addition to the available state apparatus. However, without reconstruction, living conditions will only deteriorate further, thereby indefinitely postponing the recovery of Syria and perpetuating instability. Western states have been apprehensive to provide reconstruction support due to the absence of substantial reforms and genuine political transition (International Crisis Group 2019). They do not wish to empower Assad in the repression of Syrians and thereby become complicit in financing human rights violations. However, the situation of improving living conditions for the Syrian people is further complicated by the limitations placed on international aid provision by the Syrian government (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

After more than a decade of conflict, the Syrian people and its diaspora face immense humanitarian and reconstruction needs. The devastating impact of the conflict ranges widely from the physical destruction of infrastructure and housing, economic devastation and suffering with regards to the social landscape, as well as more specific "arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, including through sexual violence, and … involuntary or enforced disappearance to intimidate and punish perceived political opponents and dissenting civilians and their families" (UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, 2021, p. 24). All armed actors in the conflict, whether domestic or foreign, have been accused of human rights violations (UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, 2020). Van Schaack (2020) elaborates further on the experiences of the Syrian people through an international law lens:

> The Syrian people have witnessed and been subjected to deliberate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate attacks; the misuse of conventional, unconventional, and improvised weapon systems; industrial-grade custodial abuses in a vast network of formal and informal prisons; unrelenting siege warfare; the denial of humanitarian aid and what appears to be the deliberate use of starvation as a weapon of war; sexual violence, including the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls trafficked from Iraq and the sexual torture of detained men and boys; and the international destruction of irreplicable cultural property. … enforced disappearances. … use of prohibited weapons to target civilians [chemical weapons] ... And, the sectarian nature of the violence has raised the spectre of genocide against ethno-religious minorities (p. 1-2).

This is in addition to the significant losses in human development in education and health and human suffering due to death, injury, and displacement. Within the first four years of the Syrian conflict, Syria lost 23.3 years of development on the Human Development Index (Alnafrah & Mouselli, 2020, p. 938). The death toll has been estimated at more than 585 000 people, with child life expectancy dropping by 13 years, and more than half of the pre-conflict population is displaced, either as internally displaced persons or as refugees (Jabbour et al., 2021, p. 1). Moreover, Jabbour et al. (2021) draw attention to the "[w]eaponisation of health care, including attacks on health-care facilities and targeting of health-care workers, [which] has been a defining feature of this conflict" (p. 1). However, most troubling is the social polarisation that has emerged throughout the conflict, which is intensifying throughout the post-conflict stage. As observed in *Syria at War: Eight Years On* a report by ESCWA (2020), this is what may prove to be, in the long term, one of "the conflict's most destructive legacies" (p. 46).

It is argued throughout this paper that Assad, through the process of authoritarian conflict management and reconstruction, is reshaping the country to meet its own needs and preferences in order to stay in power. As a result, the underlying conditions that ignited the revolution, whilst 'addressed' on a superficial level without true reform, have only been exacerbated. Regardless of the actual monetary cost of reconstruction – which, measured through volumes of destruction, is estimated at $388 billion US dollars, whilst physical costs of destruction are estimated at $120 billion US dollars by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (Andersson & Waage, 2021, p. 7) – the long-term effects of the binary othering present within Syria does not bode well for the potential of a new social contract and only serves to prolong conditions of insecurity and instability. If the social order remains exclusionary, so will the peace process. At present, the "bifurcation of Syrian society into the loyal and disloyal" (Abboud, 2021, p. 14) continues and builds upon patterns of violence and suppression that pre-date the civil war. This paper will identify violent and coercive efforts at the hands of the Assad regime that deepen authoritarian forms of peacemaking. The Assad government contributes to the formation of new exclusionary norms surrounding peacekeeping through social, legal and political measures. The results of these measures will prove long-lasting and irreversible if no "accountable, inclusive and equitable reconstruction process" (ESCWA, 2020, p. 46) is initiated.

The paper will first cover a brief modern history of the Syrian state and how the Assad regime was formed under Hafez al-Assad and maintained by his son, Bashar al-Assad. It uses the 2011 uprisings as a jumping-off point, pays particular attention to the consolidation of power by Assad père and fils, and notes the importance authoritarian upgrading had on creating and preventing issues that ultimately led to the civil war. This is

followed by a segment on authoritarian conflict management that delves deeper into what authoritarian and illiberal practices are and how they take form throughout the Assad regime. It considers how the termination of civil conflicts have taken place in the past, and how through the contested international order, liberal ideas of peacebuilding are fading. The paper then introduces the analytical framework of authoritarian conflict management and uses it to step through discursive, spatial, and economic practices employed by the Assad regime to maintain power and enforce its own legitimacy. Issues particular to the reconstruction are then examined and considers the reconstruction goals of Syria, its allies, and the west. Lastly, the paper reflects on what a non-linear peace process means for the revolution.

1. Forming a Regime; Conjuring a Revolution

This section will explore what factors led to the 2011 uprising and how it evolved into a civil war. It will include an overview of Syria's modern history and how this has informed power relations and levels of instability, violence, and repression. Examining previously existing patterns of authoritarian governance leads to a better understanding of how Assad has responded to times of crisis, the vulnerability of his rule, and the resilience of his rule and how society has adapted to this changing yet continuous political environment.

1.1 The Uprising

The uprising broke out in March 2011, taking place against a backdrop of simultaneously occurring protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen and deep-seated 'social memories of political violence' (Ismail, 2018, p. 22). A critical spark that helped set in motion the revolution was the torture of children "at the hands of security forces under the command of a close relative of the president" (Wedeen, 2019, p. 2). It was alleged that a group of school children, ranging in age from ten to fifteen, wrote the revolutionary slogan, "it's your turn, Doctor," on a school wall in Dara'a, referring to Assad's education as an ophthalmologist. The anti-regime graffiti was a reaction to the arrest of two women from the same town, who, during a phone call, had allegedly spoken about the possibility of Mubarak stepping down in light of the Egyptian protests, and whether Assad may soon follow. After the arrest of the children, residents of Dara'a marched to demand the release of the children. Word began to spread that the children were being tortured in detention. Demonstrations ensued, the proceedings of which were eventually met by security forces, who opened fire on the crowd, killing four. A "cycle of demonstrations and brutal crackdowns" (Wedeen, 2019, p. 2) ensued, gradually escalating and eventually spreading to neighbouring towns and the rest of Syria, including Homs, Lattakia, Idlib, al-Hasaka,

Dayr al-Zur and Hama. The sequence of events – the mistreatment of children in prison, the disrespect shown to elders attempting to negotiate their release, and the unaccountability of regime officials – were indicative of long-standing grievances of the Assad government. It is difficult to discern whether Assad was recognisant of the level of dissatisfaction or had faith in the mechanisms of suppression that had been in place for years, thereby being immune from the Arab Spring (Shama, 2021; van Schaack, 2020, p. 21). Nonetheless, it is clear that the authoritarian mechanisms failed to account for the levels of solidarity demonstrated by Syrians adequately. Albeit, these levels of solidarity would, in a later stage of the conflict, dissipate after the involvement of international actors. The regime, however, adapted to and overcame its vulnerabilities, as it always had.

1.2 A String of Coups

After gaining independence from the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon in 1946, Syria experienced an extended period of tumultuous political transitions. The French government, cautious of Sunni Arab nationalism, opposed the notion of Syrian statehood. No less than eight successful coup attempts occurred between 1949 and 1970. The military proved too dominant for the weak parliamentary system left behind by French colonialism; moreover, regional politics influenced domestic politics to a significant extent (Phillips, 2016, p. 11). The diverse population also posed a challenge to state-building. Syria was composed of an Arab Sunni majority of 60 per cent compared to the remainder, which consisted of several religious and ethnic minorities, including Alawis, Christians, Kurds, as well as smaller groups such as the Druze, Ismailis, and Armenians. A schism prevailed based on identity and ideology and the reality of regionalism and localism that pulled the Syrian state into opposite directions (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021, p. 3). Encouraged by the French policy of 'divide and rule', members of minority communities had risen through

the ranks of the army, creating tension between the civilian government and military leadership. The rise of Pan-Arab nationalism, spurred on by Gamal Abdel Nasser, second President of Egypt, also took hold of Syria. In 1958 Syria would become part of the United Arab Republic after unification with Egypt, leading to the introduction of authoritarian structures by the Egyptian government that would remain even after independence was re-established in 1961 (Devlin, 1991, p. 1402). Egypt demonstrated a tendency to dominate and overshadow Syria, subsuming its issues. The split, contrary to the ideas of Pan-Arabism, ended up reinforcing "a sense of Syrian distinctiveness" (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021, p. 4). The Syrian government, however, continued to prove unstable. Internal power struggles persisted, and another coup was successfully staged in 1963 that saw the socialist pan-Arab Ba'ath Party rise to power.

Only three years later, the Ba'ath Party, whose member base mainly consisted of a generation of activists that stemmed from minority, peasant or rural bourgeois families (Hinnebusch, 2011, p. 109), experienced an internal coup in 1966. From this internal coup, the Military Committee Ba'athists overcame an internal division, only for another contest between two factions to arise (Devlin, 1991, p. 1403). However, it is from this power struggle that Hafez al-Assad was able to outmanoeuvre Salah Jadid. In November 1970, Assad, the then Defence Minister, on becoming aware of a party congress decision to oust him from both party and government posts, took action in the form of the 'Corrective Movement' – a bloodless coup – that would expose Syria to significant, and increasingly authoritarian, reform.

This tumultuous short history acts as a precursor of Hafez Assad's own solidification of power and the consolidation of the Ba'ath regime. Assad formed a 'presidential monarchy'

by gradually concentrating power above the party. He did so, as elucidated by Rabinovich and Valensi (2021), through a strategy of 'concentric circles' – an inner core surrounded by larger circles – where the inner core consisted of a neo-patrimonial regime that relied upon Assad's immediate family, and more generally the Alawi community as well as trusted insiders (p. 12). This inner core was maintained more broadly by political and military institutions, the Ba'ath Party, and sympathetic civil society organisations. Devlin (1991) divides Assad's rule into three broad phases that highlight the progression of the regime. First, Assad ensured the loyalty of the rural population by providing access to land through land reclamation, education, and services, including electricity and water, and opening up private economic activity (p. 1406). In the second phase, Assad had to address the Islamic revolutionary movement that arose due to the alienation of urban Sunni Muslim groups (Devlin, 1991, p. 1406). This culminated in the Hama massacre at the hands of the government in 1982. However, the third phase is marked by the stagnation of both the economy and Assad's governance due to illness, although Assad manages to resist any delegation of authority (Devlin, 1991, p. 1406). This ushered in a fourth phase of economic reform and austerity measures. Whilst the public sector remained dominant; it now coexisted alongside a budding public sector that, although controlled, allowed members to "develop a stake in the regime's durability" (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021, p. 14). Relations of patronage were encouraged by the regime, and a new network of economic elite emerged. Composed of Sunni-Alawi partnerships, Assad established a "cross-sectarian cross-class coalition" (Hinnebusch, 2011, p. 110) through clientelism.

This coalition, however, was superficial at best and only extended little favour to the elite and mainly at an economic level. Compliance was still required in other branches of society and at the other 'levels of society. Moreover, any compliance already induced

required safeguarding. Political violence came hand-in-hand with Assad's project to solidify power. Throughout Assad's various phases of governance, specific strategic choices were also made that would lead to significant ramifications for the Syrian people. Political opposition, for instance, was not tolerated, as was attested by the Hama massacre in 1982.

The Hama massacre is a potent exemplification of the brutal "centrality of violence" that was and continues to be part of the "terms of rule" of the Assad family (Ismail, 2018, p. 131). The event is engrained within the collective memory of Syrians as a particularly violent period in Syrian history. The civilian death toll was estimated to be upwards of 10,000 but remains unknown and unknowable (van Schaack, 2020, p. 20). Discussion of the massacre in the public sphere was considered highly taboo, and no official memorialisation exists. The brutality inflicted by the regime, especially during the period of 1976 to 1982, had a seemingly unbounded disciplinary effect. As recognised by Ismail (2018) in her analysis of how the regime deployed violence on a massive scale throughout Syria, the events of that day "inaugurated a model of violence and a frame of power relations. Regime brutality in Hama was constructed as a template for the regime's anticipated use of violence to suppress opposition" (p. 132). Gradually, many Syrians became aware of their position as subjects of the Assad regime, and no one was immune to the state policy of arbitrary arrests and detentions, systemic torture, forced disappearances, and summary executions (van Schaack, 2020, p. 20).

Thus, political opposition was also rejected at the level of the everyday. A telling example is found in the interview of a young boy by Wedeen (1999, p. 66) who, while attending a two-week state-sponsored Ba'ath Party summer camp, was repeatedly bullied and cursed

by a colonel. Eventually, the colonel struck the boy, and the boy hit back. The boy's peers defended him, shouting the slogan, 'with spirit, with blood, we sacrifice for you, O Hafiz.' This political slogan, Wedeen notes (1999), aided the boys by protecting them from harm but also appropriated the slogan "for the ordinary citizen against a representative of state power" (p. 66). Wedeen (1999) aptly demonstrates in her book *Ambiguities of Domination*, whilst the conditions of the regime alongside an omnipresent security apparatus created, to all appearances, a 'cult' of Assad, yet the subjects of the regime, as well as onlookers, were by no means believers.

Whilst maintaining close control of the army and coup-proofing relevant units, the regime also maintained a vast network of intelligence and security services, known as the *Mukhabarat*, that ensured all possible threats to the regime were under surveillance. Not only were the multiple agencies headed by those closest in Assad's inner circle, being coastal Alawis from the Homs-Hama region (Daher, 2020, p. 21), but the security services were also used to spy on each other, alongside more typical threats such as external enemies and the opposition, for instance through vetting electoral candidates. However, the threat of the *mukhabarat* was internalised and extended to those within the diaspora (van Schaack, 2020, p. 19). The intelligence and security services were in and of themselves influential political brokers (Hinnebusch, 2011, p. 112). However, they were kept in check by Assad by frequently cycling through heads of leadership, as well as keeping the agencies in direct competition with one another, thereby preventing any potential build-up of power (Wedeen, 1999, p. 207). Thus, a climate of fear was present not only for ordinary Syrians but also for those within the regime (Phillips, 2016, p. 53).

This climate of fear was one of many things carried over to the rule of Hafez al-Assad's son, Bashar al-Assad. Assad's thirty-year rule was built on a precarious balance between a family-sectarian core with a complex periphery of institutions belonging to the state, Ba'ath Party, army, and security services, as well as the support of much of the general population (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021, p. 19-20). Despite Syria passing as stable, it was heavily dependent on the relations Assad père had cultivated. Nevertheless, Syria was also heavily in need of modernisation and reform, as patronage networks had started to fester into inefficiency and corruption. As the health of Assad père deteriorated, efforts were made to ensure hereditary succession to Bashar. After the death of Hafez in June 2000, Bashar became president of Syria.

1.3 Inheriting a Regime

Bashar Assad, however, would operate in a different political climate than his father that brought with it new opportunities and challenges that were to be balanced alongside those of Assad senior's legacy. A significant shift, as identified by Wedeen (2019), was present to the rule of Assad junior that distinguished it from Assad senior; 'circles of privilege' were expanding and contracting at the same time, widening the gap between the rich and poor, yet also providing an opportunity to those who had previously been without (p. 26-27). A certain cosmopolitanism was projected by Assad and his wife, Asma' al-Assad, that provided something akin to a smokescreen. As elaborated on by Wedeen (2019):

> "[b]y disarticulating regime from state, the ideal of the moral neoliberal ruling couple provided a new basis for public dissimulation – for an acting *as if* the glamorous neoliberal autocratic regime was not personalist, patronage-based, kleptocratic, and violent; for acting *as if* its lip service to individual voluntarism and civic empowerment could actually

> offer a civil, moral solution to the problems of governance that the corrupt, tired, crude, overtly brutal developmentalist party state of old did not" (p. 27, emphasis in original).

For issues were present throughout and Bashar, whilst sharing in name with his father, had little proven political experience. However, the transition to power went smoothly bar a necessary legislative change to amend the age requirement of presidential candidates and an election in which Bashar ran unopposed. The acceptance of Bashar's ascension to presidency contained a duality of promise; both a continuation of the Assad legacy as established by Hafez, where the Assad family was located at the top of the political system, in control of, and supported by, the secret services and the semblance of the Ba'ath Party, as well as the chance for a young leader to bring forth reform and modernisation, catching up with global trends (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 1). However, this duality, when presented as a delineation not existing in harmony, may be observed as the old guard versus the vanguard. It would not be long before Assad disregarded an agenda for political liberalisation and once again relied on the old guard's approach.

Take, for instance, the Damascus Spring of 2001. In the late 2000s, a group of political activists and members of civil society demanded that the emergency and martial law, as imposed in 1963, be lifted. Furthermore, they sought freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of public life in general, amnesty for political prisoners, and political exiles' return. More extensive demands included free elections, seeking to end the monopoly on political power that the Ba'ath Party held. Syrian intellectuals were at the forefront of those supporting the movement. Initially, Assad granted certain concessions based on the demands; hundreds of political prisoners received pardons, political parties were allowed to publish papers, and freedom of expression was marginally tolerated.

However, within a year, crackdowns on opposition activity as well as the arrest of activists brought the Damascus Spring to an abrupt end. The old guard likely encouraged the suppression of the movement to restrain criticism of the current regime further and prevent a growing opposition from forming (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021, p. 22).

In 2005, however, Assad initiated an ‘anti-corruption campaign to remove long-standing Ba’ath Party members from their political posts (Hinnebusch, 2011, p. 121). For example, one of the resignations included First Vice President Khaddam, who had been part of Hafez’s inner circle for over 35 years. Whilst the move helped safeguard and consolidate the personal power of Assad, it also commenced a disassociation from the old guard, whose average age gap with Assad was spanning 30 years. Assad was now able to, at least somewhat, effectively leverage against entrenched members of the Ba’ath Party, signalling newfound confidence and security in his position as leader. It was also one of many signs yet to come that continuity of regime dominance, in accordance with the intentions of Hafez, was preferred by Bashar.

Thus, areas of reform, and those of non-reform, were strategically measured and calculated in such a way as to not impact the survival of the Assad regime. Hinnebusch and Zintl (2015) refer to this phenomenon as ‘authoritarian upgrading’. A critical area that required reform was the economic sphere; Assad sought to open up the Syrian economy to allow it to adapt to the increasing globalisation of the world economy. Through its trajectory of economic liberalisation, however, the regime started to lose autonomy gradually. The process of de-Ba’athification of the economy had gradually commenced in the 1990s, members of the party became increasingly marginalised, and instead, people in business started to hold a greater degree of control and influence. Under Bashar, the state grew

increasingly reliant on the private sector, and while it grew substantially, it presented the regime with new dilemmas. While the old model was becoming increasingly unstable, could the government "afford to completely abandon its key constituents, namely the urban workforce and peasantry?" (Dahi & Munif, 2012, p. 326). When not implemented to handle crises, economic reform would substantially alienate a part of the population benefiting from the populist social contract whose support was relied upon. Assad needed to strike a precarious balance or substantially change the status quo related to the expectations of the population, effectively removing the scale on which the balance was struck from the equation altogether.

By providing a leading role to the private sector, a new class of 'crony capitalists' started to emerge. Built on rent-seeking alliances of political brokers, the class was, and continues to be, led by the family of Assad's mother, the Makhloufs, as well as the regime-supportive bourgeoisie (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 7). This class was well suited to take advantage of the opportunities limited economic liberalisation provided to establish business relations with external investors. However, this meant that while the regime was able to survive a gradual transition to some semblance of a market economy, it did so by discouraging productive capital, as it was now instead placed in the hands of a select few (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2015, p. 7). Whilst the regime posited the goal of reform as a 'social market economy to appease both sides of the scale, in reality, the reform process was indistinguishable from neoliberalism, emphasising capital accumulation while disregarding equality and distribution. In comparison to Egypt and Tunisia, the introduction of neoliberal policy was not as extensive and rapid but nonetheless proved disparaging for most Syrians. The implementation of reform was "increasingly predatory" and was centred

on "consumption, unproductive investments, and an increasing role of the service sector" (Dahi & Munif 2012, p. 327).

The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism came with pronounced socio-political implications. Dahi & Munif (2012) point out the existence of an organic co-constitutive relationship between the emergence of a market economy and coercive rule (p. 324). The effects that economic reform brought about created space for social revolt to arise, including a widening city-rural and a widening inequality gap between the poor and wealthy (Dahi & Munif, 2012, p. 324). This, in turn, posed a threat to the state's hierarchy of power that had to be blocked through whichever means necessary. At moments of crisis, the Assad regime governs through its' right hand', "deploying its technologies of coercion and violence" that threaten its legitimacy (Dahi & Munif, 2012, p. 324). However, this has created an endless feedback loop that has since descended into civil war. As elucidated by Hinnebusch and Zintl (2015): "…corresponding to each shorter-term gain for regimes from the changes… [it implemented], themselves meant to correct previous vulnerabilities in populist authoritarianism, there have been cumulative *long-run costs*, generating *new* vulnerabilities" (p. 2, emphasis in original).Henceforth, a hydra effect is in play, each time creating a more dire and costly crisis for the Assad regime to respond to, the solution to which creates another set of problems entirely, all at an exponentially increasing rate. However, this is not to say that the Syrian government was at no point deemed unstable by onlookers. For instance, it effectively dealt with tensions between Syria's allies and Israel, the international isolation imposed on Syria after the Iraq war, and its expulsion from Lebanon (Heydemann & Leenders, 2013, p. 35). Henceforth, the initial response to the question of whether the Arab Spring would take hold in Syria was

dismissed by many outside observers, upholding sentiments that the Syrian government would be ‘immune’ (Achcar, 2020, p. 13).

1.4 The Arab Spring

Even Assad himself doubted the Arab Spring would spread to Syria; he acknowledged that Syria was by no means isolated from the uprisings but maintained his confidence regarding Syria’s stability (Phillips, 2016, p. 40). Throughout the years, it would become apparent that his comments were not entirely misplaced. Nonetheless, the uprisings represented a significant challenge to authoritarian rule across the Middle East, countries that, according to many in the West, were resistant to democracy due to Islam (Achcar, 2020, p. 14). However, as posited by Dahi and Munif (2012), had it not been for Western colonialism exporting a surplus of violence to the margins, there would not necessarily have been a need to revolt against the imposed status quo. Thus, the Arab Spring can be placed within the context of a struggle against Arab authoritarianism as well as a Western dependency; “[t]he *cost* of Western neo-colonialism combined with local authoritarianism is too high to be sustained” (p. 328, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, the adaptation of neoliberalism, which is, in essence, another Western import, by Arab states only intensified contestation. However, this perspective implies authoritarian rulers are kept on a string by the West. The United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Israel, nonetheless, had a vested interest for specifically the Syrian regime to maintain regional hegemony (Dahi & Munif, 2012, p. 329). International perspectives regarding the success of authoritarian upgrading at the hands of Assad rule would soon change to that of a repressive regime clinging to power after March 2011.

2. Practices of Authoritarian Conflict Management

This section considers how Syria, as an authoritarian regime, responds to internal violent conflict and how this process stands in opposition to the liberal peacebuilding practices the Western-dominated international community is more partial to. Authoritarian conflict management provides a way to analyse the authoritarian and illiberal practices of the Assad regime throughout the civil war and discern the impact of such practices on Assad's consolidation of power and legitimacy. Through the framework, it is possible to step through specific instances of violent and non-violent strategy the Assad regime relies upon to stay in power.

2.1 Authoritarian and Illiberal Practices

What makes authoritarianism authoritarian? When approached with a comparative politics lens, it encompasses regimes that do not periodically hold free and fair elections. While this definition may be useful, for instance, it is possible to classify the Syrian regime as authoritarian under this definition; it is operationally limited. As put forward by Glasius (2018), by placing a focus on authoritarian and illiberal practices, it is possible to overcome limitations surrounding, for instance, a single-state context. A focus placed on practices, too, will aid in understanding how the Syrian State–Government–President are in possession of authoritarian and illiberal practices. This distinction is relevant because while Assad held on to his position as president, he has done so at fluctuating levels of legitimacy throughout the civil conflict. Glasius (2018) proposes separate definitions for authoritarianism and illiberal practices; this adds an additional layer for understanding. Authoritarian practices are defined as "patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor extends control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice" (Glasius, 2018, p. 517). This is contrasted

with the definition of illiberal practices, which consist of "patterned and organised infringements of individual autonomy and dignity" (Glasius, 2018, p. 517). The difference between the two may be summarised by the threat they pose; authoritarian practices mainly threaten the democratic process, whereas illiberal practices mainly threaten human rights (Glasius, 2018, p. 517). Nonetheless, both practices can, and often do, exist simultaneously.

It is worth noting, however, that often a rigid dichotomy is present when discussing authoritarianism. The 'opposite end of the spectrum' of authoritarianism is often unquestionably assumed to be a democracy, and this is what it is then contrasted with as part of its ontology. Indeed, this does not necessarily negate the dichotomy as wholly false, but it is prudent to recognise that a lack of democratic practices does not automatically signify authoritarianism, just as a lack of authoritarian practices does not automatically signify a democracy. Glasius (2018) talks about this issue as a matter of 'the core is still a vacuum', where the definition of authoritarianism ought not to rely on absence (p. 519).

The essence of an authoritarian regime thus lies in the active practice of disrupting or sabotaging accountability, but where are these practices located, and how do they manifest? Authoritarian practices are not limited to one individual or are not necessarily located within state political institutions and may exist within, below or beyond (Glasius, 2018, p. 521). Indeed, authoritarian practices may be located outside of state boundaries or online; exiled political actors that are part of the Syrian diaspora, for instance, do not become unsusceptible to the state's strategies of coercive control once they have crossed a border (Conduit, 2020, p. 8). This places the political actor above and in a position of control over the people affected. Heydemann and Leenders (2013) examine

authoritarianism as having a 'recombinant' quality that provides the authoritarian actor a certain level of fluidity to handle challenges and crises that aids in understanding sources of regime resilience. They define recombinant authoritarianism as "systems of rule that possess the capacity to reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements to create recognisable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations of challenges" (Heydemann and Leenders, 2013, p. 7). It, therefore, spans across the judicial system, social policy and religious institutions and occurs in the processes of authoritarian upgrading present within the Assad legacy.

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2.3 Recombinant Authoritarianism

Heydemann and Leenders (2013) demonstrate in their work, however, is that not only is this form of recombinant authoritarianism present within the Assad regime but that it is deeply embedded. Thus, authoritarian practices do not only arise in response to threats or crises as a form of defence mechanism. Instead, the Assad regime can be said to possess an 'institutional flexibility' that directs authoritarian practices at times of crises, but also as part of its everyday governance (Heydemann & Leenders, 2013, p. 7). The authors demonstrate that throughout the Assad regime, the state has adapted and morphed itself according to its needs, through for instance in the way it regulates religious affairs while at the same time maintaining, in a steadfast manner, a separation of the state from religious institutions; furthermore, in the way in which Syria has selectively empowered and employed its judicial institutions. It has managed to do this while still maintaining a certain degree of legitimacy.

Thus, as argued by Heydemann and Leenders (2013), recombinant authoritarianism provides a necessary degree of nuance to understanding authoritarianism. It is not a given that regime survival is guaranteed if a high level of legitimacy is present, and neither is a breakdown of a regime necessarily caused by a low level of legitimacy. States, including the Assad regime, use flexible strategies "along several dimensions" to combat challenges to legitimacy (Heydemann and Leenders, 2013, p. 7). The dimensions range from strategies to garner domestic support; the institutional arrangements, like judicial and redistributive arrangements, to consolidate its claim to legitimacy both at home and its claim to sovereignty at the international level; as well as its capacity to exploit internal and external threats and crises to reinforce domestic legitimacy (Heydemann and Leenders, 2013, p. 8). The 2011 uprisings and the subsequent civil war within Syria have demonstrated that throughout a period of political change, the Assad regime has heavily utilised the dynamic and adaptive traits of its governance and state-society relations. Recombinant authoritarianism thus allows for the recognition that political change "may in some instances become regime reinforcing and will not necessarily be of a liberal-democratic nature or evolve toward preconceived frameworks of authoritarian breakdown or democratic transition" (Heydemann & Leenders, 2013, p. 8). The currently low intensity or even post-conflict phase of the civil war remains a period of political change for Syria. Assad is still drawing on, and relying upon, the dynamic and adaptive authoritarian practices it has solidified over the past two decades.

2.4 Civil Conflict Termination

A traditional preference for civil war termination through a negotiated settlement in the 1990s has had lasting impacts on the discourse. The literature on civil war termination has demonstrated that negotiated settlements do not prove as effective as previously

considered, and instead, civil wars that have been ended through negotiated settlements have a higher chance of recurring than when a military victory by one side ends the conflict. Furthermore, it has also been argued that the logic behind this ‘give war a chance’ counterargument is flawed (Toft, 2010). Recognising the costs and consequences of war, especially the highly destructive nature of civil wars, as well as the assumed requirement to implement democratic institutions and rehabilitate the economy after fighting has ceased, are all important factors for ensuring an appropriate response to establish stability; however, the emphasis placed on negotiated settlements is not always appropriate. It has been demonstrated that civil wars ended through negotiated settlements are much more likely to recur (Toft, 2010, p. 27). Further, negotiated settlements do not necessarily guarantee a transition towards democracy. Instead, rebel victories have a higher chance of guaranteeing such an outcome (Toft, 2010, p. 27). Finally, economic growth trends are not tied to the type of civil war termination (Toft, 2010, p. 27). Henceforth, by limiting the type of civil war termination deemed ‘appropriate’, the discourse has given rise to other, possibly more productive, possibilities for civil war termination.

This is especially the case with regard to the Syrian civil war. International interventions, on behalf of the West, concerning a negotiated settlement for the Syrian civil war have been unproductive in most instances. At the very least, the intended outcomes of the current interventionist practices by the West have not been achieved. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly recognised that Western interventions, especially those with a focus on ‘boots on the ground’, under the guise of peace and the interests of the liberal world order, are in fact “bound up with the promotion of capitalist social relations and are a method of policing (colonial) differences globally” (Turner & Kühn, 2019, p. 239). Intervention is an embedded social practice within the international system, and it

encompasses a variety of 'hard' and 'soft' activities, ranging from "military actions and occupation, blockades and sanctions," to development aid, humanitarian programmes, political-diplomatic support, and financial assistance, including private capital investment, as well as geo-economics (Turner & Kühn, 2019, p. 239, 241). Whilst the international system is organised around the collectively held principle of sovereignty by states, in practice, disagreement often arises regarding these supposedly shared ideals, as can be witnessed by the formation of voting blocs on specific issues within the permanent bodies of the UN, especially the UN Security Council. However, the "co-constitution of liberal and authoritarian norms and practice in international spaces of conflict" is becoming more common, especially due to increasingly intersected economic exchanges (Turner & Kühn, 2019, p. 240). As part of this, the realities of a contested international order are becoming apparent and prominent; this lack of consensus also applies to liberal peacebuilding.

2.5 Fading Ideas of Liberal Peacebuilding

Ideas of liberal peacebuilding are increasingly superseded and replaced by the way state-centric authoritarian regimes respond to violent domestic challenges; authoritarian conflict management addresses this shift by providing an alternative conceptual framework to understand this process "as a form of wartime and post-conflict order in its own right" (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 487). The authoritarian conflict management approach is applicable to the current situation in Syria because of the way in which Assad has responded by using pre-war authoritarian and illiberal practices. The current winding down of the conflict has not impeded the Assad regime's continuation of violence. In addition, its reconstruction efforts are situated in an atmosphere of corruption and nepotism. The Astana Process stands as a direct case in point of the rejection of liberal principles of peace-making and post-conflict transition. Initiated by Iran, Russia and Turkey, the political negotiations

allow the tripartite regional powers to conduct political negotiations over the Syrian conflict. Whilst the process is meant to be complementary and mutually supportive of the Geneva Process, which is part of UN-led efforts, the viability of the Astana Process as an alternative forum for peace-making is nonetheless representative of "both a tension in the distribution of global geopolitical power to craft peace and also the shift towards illiberal or authoritarian peace-making around the world outside the orbit of international liberal interventions" (Abboud, 2021, p. 2). The consequences, whilst still presently unfolding, have nevertheless meant a continuation of violence and a bifurcate Syrian society. Henceforth, authoritarian conflict management serves as an essential tool to analyse how authoritarian regimes seek to prevent the recurrence of internal violent conflict.

2.6 Authoritarian Conflict Management as a Framework

Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran (2018) describe authoritarian conflict management as entailing:

> "…the prevention, de-escalation or termination of organised armed rebellion or other mass social violence such as inter-communal riots through methods that eschew genuine negotiations among parties to the conflict, reject international mediation and constraints on the use of force, disregard calls to address underlying structural causes of conflict, and instead rely on instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power" (p. 491).

The conceptual framework is, therefore, inclusive of political, social, and economic policies, alongside the presence of direct state violence. Furthermore, instead of framing the cause(s) of conflict in terms of grievances, proponents of authoritarian conflict management instead ascribe them to the greed of political actors or due to opportunity arising out of a state's weakness (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 491). Henceforth, the authoritarian

actor will attempt to reduce any opportunities or resources that would allow the mobilisation of those in opposition to the regime in addition to military action; this will take form in the assertion of hegemonic control across three different social domains; public discourse, space, and economic resources (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 491). Through examining these three pillars, different modalities of both the state and civil society are examined, thus encompassing the various phases of conflict, like the cessation of hostilities, settlements, reconstruction, and any ongoing conflict prevention (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 491).

It is important to note that authoritarian conflict management as a framework does not seek to make normative judgements regarding the quality of peace or even whether the regime's management of conflict can be considered as peace. Neither should any discussion regarding the authoritarian and illiberal practices of states be read as to offer legitimacy to such practices. As a framework, authoritarian conflict management is rooted in the field of peace studies, including liberal peace theory as well as its critiques, such as the concepts of hybridity and illiberal peace (Keen, 2021, p. 2). The framework itself, however, remains relatively new. Nonetheless, authoritarian conflict management is one of the very few approaches that seek to address the mechanisms of government responses to conflict that may not meet the standards of a scholarly established ideal of a liberal peace without dismissing it by way of moral condemnation.

2.6.1 Discursive Practices

The first pillar of authoritarian conflict management is discursive control and concerns limiting opportunities for dissent by advancing a hegemonic discourse the aim of which is to delegitimise armed opponents of the state, thereby rendering them as unsuitable partners

for negotiation. This prevents opportunities for discussion or communication more broadly where different sides to a conflict may vocalise their demands, pose questions or pass judgement; furthermore, it makes it difficult for political opponents to mobilise support. In a liberal peacebuilding approach, this process is considered a highly valuable part of the broader peace process, mainly because it encourages reconciliation. Authoritarian conflict management, however, deems such process as “counter-productive and potentially dangerous” (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 493). Discursive control is achieved in three ways; firstly, via the coercion or suppression of alternative sites of information production, as opposed to, secondly, the production of a single official state-led narrative, and finally through means of “undermining the very concept of objective truth and sowing societal divisions” (Keen, 2021, p. 2). In this sense, the third principle serves to reinforce the first two and is the most abstract.

Operationally speaking, however, Keen (2021), in a quantitative study of authoritarian conflict management, identifies two important complications regarding the principles of discursive control. Not only is the production of an official state-led narrative and suppression of alternative sites of information production common practice in authoritarian states, and not conflict management, but it is logistically difficult to identify negatives incidences of spoken practices; “a concern with only the preponderance of official discourse or addressing the possibility of certain government voices engaging in practices of discursive control while others did not is logistically unfeasible” (Keen, 2021, p. 8-9, emphasis in original). The way to combat the first is to connect practices of discursive control directly with a domestic political challenge (Keen, 2020, p. 9). Thus, Keen proposes a two-pronged definition of discursive practices that utilises a polarity to circumvent these issues as well as clarify the actions involved by the authoritarian regime.

The first prong considers negative discursive control, which can take place by way of "blocking information collection, transmission or access by any means because it is related to the conflict or explicitly to protect state security, integrity or unity" (Keen, 2021, p. 10). The second prong considers positive discursive control, which can take place by way of "an official government representative speaking publicly in a way that references the conflict and/or the opposing half of the conflict dyad but is in some way reductionist and minimises the prospect of the government considering or redressing opposition grievances" (Keen, 2021, p. 10). The main contrast between the two ways of approaching discursive practices lies in the dismissal by Keen (2021) of the third way that is outlined in the initially proposed framework. However, since the third way reinforces the first two ways, it is by no means wholly excluded in Keen's study. Instead, the two-pronged definition allows necessary operational clarity whilst still fulfilling the criterion as initially laid down in the work of Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran (2018).

By examining how the Assad regime has exercised discursive practices throughout the course of the civil war, it is possible to establish how the Syrian government framed the conflict, and the opposition and the extend of the use of force is deployed to make sure the narrative it instilled was dominant at the local, national, and international level. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Assad regime has enforced authoritarian practices since its inception; by way of illustration, Ismail (2018) classes Syria as a 'shadow state' (p. 65). While the focus here is placed on the timeline from the uprisings in March 2011 to the present day, the authoritarian and illiberal practices should not be wholly viewed within this vacuum only. Instead, the practices throughout the civil war were co-constitutive of and an expansion on already existing authoritarian practices. Rather, the civil war prompted an intensification of authoritarian and illiberal practices tied directly to armed

struggle, the consequences of which are to be endured by the Syrian people and the Syrian diaspora for the foreseeable future, at least until the next revolution.

A key positive discursive practice initiated from the start of the uprisings is the narrative, as can be found within Assad's speeches, labelling the political opponents responsible for the initial uprising as terrorists (Gaber, 2020). This official narrative has continued throughout the length of the civil war. Assad has, however, attempted throughout the conflict to make his statements of terrorism legitimate, including through the release of Salafist prisoners three months after the uprising (al-Haj Saleh, 2017, p. 31). Furthermore, this narrative was partially accepted on the international level as well, albeit with an additional layer of nuance. Even Assad's ally in Iran, President Hassan Rouhani, expressed in 2015 that while Assad was necessary to remain in power to address the terrorists, as soon as a sustainable level of stability is regained, "other plans must be put into action so as to hear the voices of the opposition as well" (Achcar, 2020, p. 73 citing CNN). For Assad, however, this partial acceptance of the narrative proved sufficient to garner enough international support to keep him in power.

Moreover, the plausible deniability that the pro-government militia known as the *shabiha* provided to cover up brutality at the hands of the regime, too, proved sufficient for Assad to deny direct involvement in certain instances of brutality. The *shabiha*, as explained by al-Haj Saleh (2017), consists of four main characteristics. First, the majority of the *shabiha* members are part of the Alawite minority and thereby granted a certain degree of protection and freedom of movement. Second, the *shabiha* are known to be inclined towards violence and are often used as a device to carry out organised and arbitrary violence against civilians. The third is the alliance of the *shabiha* to Assad, which

is "facilitated by ties of kinship and allegiance" (al-Haj Saleh, 2017, p. 54). Lastly, the *shabiha* are also economically motivated, and many work as smugglers. Whilst the group thus exhibits criminal characteristics, they are not necessarily treated as such by the state, and their separation from the state is both hazy and fluid. Instead, they were "recruited to crush the demonstrations" during the uprisings, thereby serving the interests of the 'shadow state' (Ismail, 2018, p. 84).

Furthermore, the massacre that took place in the region of El-Houla, within the Homs governorate, on May 25, 2012, has been widely attributed to have occurred at the hands of the pro-government *shabiha*. Victims of the massacre were mainly from two extended families, and of the one hundred deaths, fifty were children (van Schaack, 2020, p. 23). The massacre was unanimously condemned by the UN Security Council, as well as by UN Committee against Torture, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Human Rights Council deployed a special investigation under the Commission of Inquiry. The Syrian government also convened an inquiry of its own and attributed the event to 'terrorists' (van Schaack, 2020, p. 24). The UN Commission of Inquiry found that no evidence existed to support the Syrian government's version of events and instead found that there were 'reasonable grounds to believe' the government was responsible (van Schaack, 2020, p. 24).

Whilst the arbitrary arrests, detainments, disappearances, and torture of those suspected of government opposition is not a newly developed negative discursive practice; it has brutally intensified as a direct reaction by the Assad regime to the onset of the civil war. The military prison known as Saydnaya, located north of the capital Damascus, is run by the Syrian military police. It is one of several secret torture prisons present within Syria

and houses military officers, soldiers, and civilian detainees. The prison not only serves as a discursive practice through the suppression of political opponents, but it also serves as a form of spatial control, discussed below, through the denial of stature and the creation of a space of exception through brutality and blatant disregard for human rights. Saydnaya had been a "visually uncharted, impenetrable space with access denied to outsiders" that was the site of upwards of 5000 to 13,000 executions between September 2011 and December 2015 (Ristani, 2020, p. 2). Elmer and Neville (2021), as well as Ristani (2020), analyse how pan-acoustic surveillance constitutes a sound-based form of violence and power. The specifically designed walls of Saydnaya vibrate "with the sounds of torture" at 250 Hertz, thereby becoming a medium of torture "by which power and knowledge can permeate and reflect as vibration" (Elmer & Neville, 2021, p. 17). No journalists or independent monitors have been allowed access. Furthermore, former prisoners are only able to provide 'earwitness' accounts due to mainly being blindfolded (Ristani, 2020, p. 5). However, Saydnaya stands as an essential example of the extent to which political opponents are suppressed throughout the civil war.

The above described negative and positive discursive practices are further reinforced by the lines of sectarian division the Assad regime exploits to implement such practices. This only further exacerbates existing sectarian tensions whilst at the same time administering the unsparing effects of authoritarian and illiberal practices at the hands of the Assad regime in the first place. Throughout all the government's actions, an overarching theme of division between loyal and disloyal, and the coaxing of others to join the government in this pursuit of division, is present. Sectarianism, however, should not be mistaken for the misnomer of inherent differences amongst religions. Instead, sectarianism is, as stated by al-Haj Saleh (2018), "essentially a tool for governing and a strategy for control" (p. 34).

Sectarianism is especially dangerous as it allows for the mobilisation of supporters solely based on appealing to religious and sectarian ties without requiring any further reasoning. This creates wilful blindness to issues, distorting politics and contorting public discussion of its affairs, creating a warped view of society through which the Assad regime may freely enact its authoritarian and illiberal practices to achieve the most fundamental object of its ambition and efforts, staying in power. Furthermore, this narrative of the divide has seeped into everyday practices, firmly embedding itself within Syrian society. The Assad regime is, therefore, able to rely on most of its population to carry out discursive practices on its behalf, without always having to resort to physical acts of force and coercion. However, violence is still deemed as necessary to ensure the population is reminded to self-enforce discursive control. As elaborated on by al-Haj Saleh (2018), the "mutually reinforcing tripartite schema (hereditary dynastic rule/sectarianism/crony capitalism)" results in "the collapse of the nation as a framework for social and political life, thought and identification" (p. 158). The regime's self-reproduction is henceforth tied to the re-production of sectarian divides (al-Haj Saleh, 2018, p. 196).

2.6.2 Spatial Practices

Spatial practices constitute the second pillar of authoritarian conflict management and refer to the "political, physical and symbolic dominance of space" (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 495). Spatial practices draw upon spatial turn in peacebuilding, which posits that space, as a category, is contested and in flux, influenced by conflictual political, economic, and social forces. But space, in turn, also influences these forces. Thus, space does not only act as a fixer or inert 'container' unto which conflict events take place but as a public sphere that allows actors to seek and shape it to produce desired results and advantages "to comply with their own normative understandings of political and social order… and to promote

particular dynamics of post-conflict settlement" (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 495). Liberal peace practices, therefore, often seek to reconfigure political spaces to attempt to address grievances or create deliberate spaces for negotiation that attempt to create distance between conflict actors and contested and conflictual spaces. Take, for instance, the negotiation spaces induced by the Geneva Process and the Astana Process, which are both happening away from the conflict, and are situated in an environment where institutions such as the UN, as well as non-governmental organisations, and the international media, are dominant actors seeking to produce an amenable solution to the conflict. This stands as an example of liberal peace practices that are applied to the Syrian conflict; however, these efforts are unquestionably subsumed by authoritarian conflict management practices.

Conversely, authoritarian conflict management considers space "as a resource that can be used by would-be rebels, not only to organise, to recruit and to extract resources, but also to impose their own normative order on a part of the population" (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 495). An emphasis by authoritarian regimes is thus placed on penetrating, closing, or dominating spaces. This often leads to the creation of spaces of exception, both literally and figuratively, where different groups of people are subject to varying conventions and norms, laws, or even rights. Consequently, practices of spatial control are often violent in form. Definitionally, as formulated by Keen (2021), spatial practices may be framed as "two sides of a single coin" as taking form in both the negative and positive (p. 10). Practices of negative spatial control include attempts by a regime to "deny opposition access, public presence, or stature within a given physical space," whereas practices of positive spatial control include attempts by the regime "to demonstrate its power, reach, control and mastery over a physical space" (Keen, 2021, p. 10). Once more, concerns regarding spatial control exist surrounding the differentiation and separation between

practices occurring before and during the conflict. This is relevant in the case of Syria as some authoritarian and illiberal practices were, due to the conflict, placed on hold, whilst others were exacerbated. Take, for instance, the redevelopment initiative called 'Homs Dream,' the original plan was widely objected to by residents, not only because they would be evicted, the project would effectively price residents out of their own neighbourhoods, but also because no Alawite-dominated neighbourhoods were affected by the plans (PAX, 2017, p. 19). Throughout the conflict, the area where the redevelopment would take place was heavily bombed, effectively clearing the area ready for building. Henceforth, the plan was re-appropriated by the Syrian government through the use of force. This authoritarian practice thus does not have a clean separation from conflict, as the conflict reinforced the need for the project in the eyes of the government and is more likely to be implemented as a result of deliberate destruction of the area.

An example of positive spatial control is that in 2015, the idea of a 'de facto partition' of Syria to control the coastline, the cities of Hama and Homs, as well as Damascus, was put forward in order to aid the consolidation of territory after a bombing campaign by Russia. This would secure the key highways, including access to Beirut, and marked the first Russian military intervention. However, the advance came at a time when Syria was in retreat and under increasing pressure, although not from the Islamic State. With additional help from Iran, the Syrian government was instead able to use an 'inevitable division of Syria' to gain support from its allies to "shor[e] up the regime against the whole opposition" (Achcar, 2020, p. 93).

Martínez and Eng (2017) demonstrate a close intertwining of the ability to provide welfare with the garnering of public support. Throughout most of the conflict, Assad has continued

an increasingly expensive welfare program to consolidate his support base by guaranteeing their well-being, especially those in areas of contested or joint rule. Assad has specifically targeted bakeries that are under the control of the Islamic State to disrupt their bread-making operations. Through this spatial and economic practice, the Assad regime limits the "emblematic state performances" carried out by opposition forces (Martínex & Eng, 2017, p. 138). By preventing the ability of rebel forces to solidify relations between civilians and establish legitimacy for rebel governing bodies, "the Assad regime's provision of basic foodstuffs in territories it controls [also] alleviates economic stress, averts popular unrest and boosts morale among weary civilians, while subtly reminding them of the benefits of state power and administration" (Martínex & Eng, 2017, p. 138).

The prevention and manipulation of aid by the Assad regime is another negative spatial practice, as well as the economic practice of denying economic flows, present and has been throughout the civil conflict. Through the creation of numerous obstacles to prevent the delivery or receiving of aid, the Assad regime has micromanaged and manipulated the provision of humanitarian assistance and has bolstered his own position of power while forcing the opposition out of specific areas. The recent *Rigging the System* report by Human Rights Watch (2019) found that the Syrian government has put in place several policies that create human rights risks in humanitarian aid provision. A set of almost impenetrable logistical hurdles restrict the access of the international, and sometimes even local, staff of humanitarian organisations, as well as UN agencies. Permission is required from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for every field visit, but often requests are denied or left unanswered. Without field visits, it is challenging for humanitarian organisations to determine the needs of the public. Furthermore, project approval is pending government approval and is based on an indeterminable set of criteria, with projects often refused based

on vague and arbitrary grounds. The government, furthermore, often counter-proposes projects of their own. In most cases, humanitarian workers resort to bartering with the government for projects, thereby impeding the ability of humanitarians to make an impartial call regarding where aid is needed most. Restrictions like this have "translated into diverting aid and funding from areas previously held by anti-government groups to areas where beneficiaries were considered loyal to the government without prioritising consideration for the humanitarian needs of the beneficiaries" (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p. 23).

This has taken place, for example, in Eastern Ghouta. In October 2018, in the town of Harasta, there were 629 people in need of assistance, of which 384 were internally displaced. In the town of Douma, on the other hand, 94,000 people needed assistance, 8,500 of whom are internally displaced. According to the UN Humanitarian Needs Overview, the severity of need was far more significant in Douma than in Harasta. However, rehabilitation support given to Douma was only a fraction of that which Harasta was receiving. Harasta's population mainly consisted of those returning from pro-government areas; however, the population in Douma consisted mainly of those who had lived under Jaish al-Islam, an anti-government group and had refused to leave when evacuations took place (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p. 23-24). Arbitrary restrictions for the failure to provide aid where needed such as these, as opposed to resource and capacity restrictions, contributes to a violation of the rights of the population. The instrumentalisation of aid by the Assad government has allowed for yet another mechanism of binary othering, where Syrians whom it perceives as opponents are punished, and Syrians whom it perceives as supporters are rewarded. This is in addition to instances of misappropriation of aid funding.

The utilisation of ceasefires and so-called reconciliation agreements is another example of practices of spatial, as well as discursive, control utilised by the Assad government. In the work of Sosnowski (2020a; 2020b), the link between violence and state-building is explored. Sosnowski demonstrates that the Syrian government has purposely employed tactics of violence and order, as part of local ceasefire agreements, as a means of not only recapturing territory but of forcing citizens that are perceived as collaborators of opposition forces back under state control or otherwise relocating or detaining those it deems incapable of reintegration (Sosnowski, 2020a, p. 275). Henceforth, Assad is able to reacquire property of potentially strategic or economic value and, more importantly, identify collaborators from defectors, thereby "effectively triaging the population into three groups, those with full rights, those with restricted rights and those with none" (Sosnowski, 2020a, p. 275). Local ceasefire agreements were originally promoted by Staffan de Mistura, then UN Special Envoy to Syria, as a way to grant more bargaining power to political opponents of the regime. At first, these local 'truces' were used in Barzeh, as well as in Old Homs; however, no less than a year later, the regime started co-opting them through authoritarian conflict management practices.

The Syrian government was in a position to do so after gaining the necessary leverage to enforce the agreements due to Russia's military involvement. This is also the time the term change from 'truce' to 'reconciliation agreement.' The subtle 'rebranding', while appearing to bring it closer to liberal ideals of a peace process, is highly misleading and done purposely for the 'comfort' of the international community. The authoritarian aim of the agreement is to reassert control over territory and subsume Syrians back into the state (Sosnowski, 2020a, p. 277-8). Moreover, in order to induce areas to agree to the

reconciliation agreement, sieges or siege-like conditions were imposed, leaving the area's inhabitants without adequate access to food, supplies and humanitarian aid, but also without protection against aerial bombardment. Well-positioned elites, such as Mohieddin Manfoush, however, were able to take advantage of the situation to use their connections to the regime to allow 'sanctioned' trading routes into the besieged area. Furthermore, the government would use the pressure of the siege to make the besieged sign pro-forma agreements, the terms of which seek to evict Syrians in the besieged area forcibly. While, in theory, the wording offers a choice, the ceasefire agreement is neither an agreement nor does it present a choice to Syrians for fear of detainment and arrest, or worse. However, reports have arisen that even those who did seek to abide by the ceasefire agreement by evacuating the area were nonetheless detained and arrested (Sosnowski, 2020a, p. 281). Thus, the government carries out practices of spatial control with the forced expulsion of citizens from areas it seeks to control, all the while forcing Syrians to 'choose' whether they will be classed as loyalists or opponents to the regime, impacting whether they will be able to enjoy full rights, restricted rights, or none under the continued mechanisms of authoritarian control employed by the Assad regime.

2.6.3 Economic Practices

The third pillar of authoritarian conflict management concerns economic practices. Authoritarian conflict management prioritises conducting economic activities with the primary goal of political stabilisation. While economic growth is not necessarily dismissed, but it is not designated as the most important. This goal is approached in two ways, again in a positive/negative organisational structure, through denying rebels "access to economic and financial resources" and ensuring that those loyal to the regime "are the main beneficiaries of financial flows through the conflict zone" (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 498). The

second way is primarily conducted after the cessation of intense violence. It, therefore, stands in contrast with liberal ideas that focus on promoting inclusive, broad-based growth and poverty reduction (Keen, 2021, p. 11). However, here too, problems arise with distinguishing practices arising from and through the conflict already well-established practices existing before the civil war. Henceforth, as proposed by Keen (2021), economic practices must include either the denial of "economic flows to specific populations in response to political events relating to a specific conflict" event, "constitute new relationships of economic patronage" specifically to aid in conflict management, or "reward allies, punish enemies and reshape the political economy of the country towards a single-pyramid structure" (Keen, 2021, p. 11-12).

The economic practices appropriated by the Syrian government with the aim of political stabilisation range from the denial and repurposing of aid funds, currency manipulation to the smuggling of goods and corruption. In January 2021, the production of 5000-pound notes was initiated by the Syrian government, prompting fears of hyperinflation (Andersson & Waage, 2021, p. 7). Relations of patronage have also been placed under pressure. Tensions between Assad and Rami Makhlouf reached an all-time high in early 2020. In May 2020, Makhlouf's assets were frozen by Assad (Andersson & Waage, 2021, p. 8). This demonstrates that Assad continues to keep his inner circle in check. Nonetheless, Syria is in possession of a war economy that has emerged; however, as the conflict has prolonged, it has become more and more entrenched. However, the Assad regime has conveniently turned a blind eye to the business elites who benefit from these systems. Indeed, several members of its new patronage networks are war profiteers. This shadow economy, however, has side-tracked some rebel groups from fighting against the Syrian regime to fighting each other for power as they transition into the roles of warlords

(Abboud, 2014). However, the pro-government militias pillaged the homes of those who were refused to return to their homes or who had forcibly lost the title to their homes, going so far as to strip the houses of building materials such as copper pipes, electrical wiring and light bulbs, rendering the house unsuitable for living in. These looted goods were later sold in 'Sunni markets' in Alawite neighbourhoods in Homs (PAX, 2017, p. 26).

Another example of economic practices are the empirical findings of de Juan and Bank (2015), establish that "patterns of selective goods provision correlate with geographical patterns of violence in Syria" (p. 101). Their research demonstrates the existence of patron-client networks where a nexus exists between the provision of political support of subdistricts and the preferential treatment by the state with regards to the likelihood of violence (de Juan & Bank, 2015).

Manipulation of currency and corruption issues are closely intertwined, especially with regard to imports. Importing goods is notoriously tricky; importers need to be well-connected in order to receive permission from the government. Henceforth, many goods are smuggled into Syria, which brings forth a routine practice of bribing. Due to the introduction of a new requirement in 2019, exporters are required to sell 'back' their dollar profits to the Central Bank of Syria at the official exchange rate. The official exchange rate is artificially strong, especially when compared to the 'grey market', resulting in significant losses of those attempting to conduct business. The policy has resulted in backlash, prompting street protests that the government had to put an end to (Andersson & Waage, 2021, p. 7). Manufacturers, importers, and factory owners, for instance, are left behind due to the "gutting of Syria's work force [which] is reinforced by the degradation

of essential support structures, [which] is replicated across all sectors" (Synaps, 2019). For example, a factory owner in Aleppo faces a number of difficulties, including shortages of electricity and fuel, as well as skilled workers; most of Syria's male workforce has been displaced to rebel-held areas or Turkey, either for fear of persecution or conscription (Synaps, 2019). The factory owner describes that many other industrialists also "want to reopen, but they can't find male workers – and, when they do, security services come and arrest them" (Synaps, 2019). Furthermore, students still enrolled in universities are deliberately failing their final exams to prevent graduating and therefore delay military service (Synaps, 2019). This 'brain drain' has also impacted the agricultural sector, as well as government institutions and severely complicates prospects for recovery.

The authoritarian conflict management analytical framework allows for a deeper understanding of modes of peace that fall outside of the 'expected' order, one that falls within the well-established and researched realm of liberal peace processes. Through discerning how authoritarian conflict management takes shape through discursive, spatial, and economic practices that aim to prevent, de-escalate, or terminate conflict, a better understanding of the relationship between the two opposing ideas of authoritarian conflict management and liberal peacebuilding, which emphasises compromise, negotiation, and power-sharing, may also be reached. As an analytical framework, authoritarian conflict management is still developing. Yet, increasingly states are dismissing liberal peacebuilding models in favour of authoritarian modes of conflict management. Whilst the international community and its institutions appear to remain committed to liberal peacebuilding models for the near future; states are increasingly re-assessing previously well-established norms. Nonetheless, as has been demonstrated above, authoritarian conflict management practices and their results are not harmless, and while liberal

peacebuilding and its results also cannot lay claim to this, it is arguably more respective of human rights. Furthermore, authoritarian conflict management, as witnessed in Syria, has managed to subdue or appropriate most liberal peacebuilding attempts to its own interests, and neither is it facing significant if any, accountability for its actions, other than very strongly worded international condemnations.

The three pillars aid in gathering an understanding of how a regime responds to domestic challenge. However, specifically with regards to the Syrian case, it is difficult to neatly and holistically account for overlap between both pre-conflict and conflict stages, as well as overlap amongst the three pillars themselves. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Assad regime engages effectively in all three pillars of authoritarian conflict management and is being carried through in the reconstruction phase. This will only serve to solidify and embed the authoritarian and illiberal practices that arose due to the conflict. Furthermore, Syria's authoritarian conflict management will not end until the Assad legacy feels secure again in its dominant position, and then it will be a question of upkeep, rather than dismantling authoritarian and illiberal practices, in order to prevent the next revolution. Additionally, Assad has witnessed the gradual backing down of Western nations in their pursuit of liberal peacebuilding. Whilst liberal practices have indeed limited the full span of Assad's dominance throughout the conflict; it leaves the future Assad regime without much of the counterbalancing influences that pulled it in line previously, thereby assisting him in his concentration of political power. Moreover, it is only a matter of time before neighbouring states, as well as western states, re-engage and re-establish relations with the Syrian government, especially with regards to economic matters, thereby allowing Assad to regain legitimacy. Currently, the emphasis on the 'local turn' in liberal peacebuilding practices

will not serve to minimise the impact of the authoritarian and illiberal practices of Assad's government throughout the reconstruction process.

3 Where Does Reconstruction Lead?

Reconstruction may be viewed through a variety of lenses by different actors that speak to the goals it places at the core. Imady (2019) puts forth the conceptualisation of reconstruction as utopia, opportunity, and punishment. The need for reconstruction is unmistakable and substantial. However, it is highly unlikely that the cessation of violence alongside reconstruction efforts will be enough to alleviate the lived reality for millions of Syrians without actual reform of the regime's "political-economic modus operandi" (Batrawi, 2018, p. 3). Unrealistic expectations of what reconstruction will be able to achieve in Syria still exist within the Western-dominated international community. These unrealistic expectations will only serve to fuel the reconstruction stalemate in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2020b, p. 120).

By viewing reconstruction as utopia, it places emphasis on the activity and method of reconstruction, as opposed to reconstruction being the objective or end goal itself (Imady, 2019, p. 9-10). Utopian ideals allow for the development of reconstruction imaginaries, whereby actors may put into practice any number of ways to actualise their preferred reconstruction activities. Nonetheless, a utopian viewing of reconstruction may serve to undermine differences of short- and long-term realities of a society attempting to re-gather itself after conflict and turmoil. The Syrian regime has communicated a rather vague, yet utopian, vision of reconstruction (Imady, 2019, p. 11). In an interview with a German newspaper in June 2013, Assad spoke of what Syrian reconstruction efforts might entail:

> "…the more arduous challenge lies in rebuilding, socially and psychologically, those who have been affected by the crisis. It will not be easy to eliminate the social effects of the crisis, especially extremist ideologies. Real reconstruction is about developing minds, ideologies and values. Infrastructure is valuable but not as valuable as human beings; reconstruction is about perpetuating both" (Imady, 2019, p. 11 referencing Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung).

This vision of reconstruction aligns with the way the Assad regime has enforced the strict binary othering on its population. By classing Syrians as either loyal or disloyal and part of the opposition, Assad is bringing about a broader exclusionary peace process and an accompanying exclusionary reconstruction process. Assad is, in its most simple form, manipulating the reconstruction process, both spatially and discursively, so as to favour loyalists. This serves as a continuation of the authoritarian and liberal practices enacted throughout the conflict management process.

By placing its initial utopian vision of what the Assad regime would look like in the reconstruction phase into practice, reconstruction is now also perceived by the government through the lens of punishment. Imady (2019) refers to the ability of reconstruction to be "weaponised to exclude, or include, legitimise or demonise" (p. 17). Thus, whilst reconstruction may signal an 'end phase to the Syrian civil war, it is by no means the end of Assad's authoritarian conflict management which encompasses reconstruction and will therefore continue to use authoritarian and illiberal practices to "fortify and strengthen the patrimonial and despotic character of the regime and its networks, while being employed as a means to punish or discipline former rebellious populations" (Daher, 2018, p. 23). Henceforth, the Assad regime is apportioning roles of accountability and blame within the conflict, an action usually reserved for the criminal law system of the judicial system

branch and only applied to those who are in violation of committing illegal acts. However, the criterion it uses instead consists of the strict binary othering of 'loyalist' or 'opponent', which will render the subject with no rights, limited rights, or full rights under Assad's continued governance. Assad is thus consolidating his power base by forcing out its political opponents through this mechanism of binary othering, as well as by actively preventing those who left from returning through the legal or physical obstruction. For example, the PAX (2017) report *No Return to Homs* demonstrates how Syrian government displacement strategies, as well as its siege and destroy strategies, are used as a practice of state-led demographic engineering that aims to "permanently manipulate the population along sectarian lines in order to consolidate the government's power base" (p. 9).

Almanasfi (2019) demonstrates that Syria's approach to reconstruction is not only embedded in its experience of the conflict and that it also draws upon its history of authoritarian upgrading and 'sectarianisation', which already saw the implementation of specific urban planning practices (p. 59). Sectarianisation, in the work of Almanasfi, similar to the al-Haj Saleh (2017) understanding of sectarianism, is defined as a political tool; "the way that those in power treat pre-existing and not necessarily politically-activated identities and modes of self-organisation to ensure the loyalty of their support base and quell potential opposition" (Almanasfi, 2019, p. 62). The conflict has, therefore, also provided an opportunity for Assad to implement construction plans that were already developed prior to the civil war, yet serve similar aims, to gentrify cities with private foreign investors and construction companies (Alamanasfi, 2019, p. 92). The main obstacle posed to the state-led reconstruction process is funding.

The Syrian government cannot at present afford the cost of rebuilding and has courted foreign financing, the results of which have been uncertain. However, this leads to the lens of reconstruction as opportunity. By placing emphasis on reconstruction within the international sphere, Syria signals to other states that the civil war is over and that it will be seeking opportunities to re-establish its legitimacy. The opportunity presented to other states with regards to funding or assisting with the reconstruction process, especially as a form of intervention, however, is significantly limited. Key productive actors to the reconstruction process include Russia, Iran, with Turkey taking on a smaller role. The European and United States approach, however, is riddled with complications.

The Western approach to reconstruction, situated within the realm of liberal peacebuilding, is at odds with the reality of Syria's authoritarian conflict management practices. Prefigurative post-conflict reconstruction plans for Syria have been abundant since the commencement of the civil war. However, the plans have rarely been reflective of the actual facts on the ground. As demonstrated by Abboud (2020), liberal interveners have a flawed tendency to assume portability of policy recommendations, take, for instance, recommendations made by the International Monetary Fund, which were actually a regurgitation of earlier, pre-conflict policy recommendations and were therefore not grounded in an understanding of the conflict itself (p. 7). More concerning, however, is that many prefigurative reconstruction plans fail to acknowledge the continuation of authoritarian and illiberal practices in Syria's post-conflict order, and they, therefore, do not contain an accurate portrayal of the local politics present in Syria. Liberal peacebuilding continues to advocate for localism and the empowerment of local actors as the way in which legitimacy and authority may be reconstituted; however, they do so through politicising questions of legitimacy and authority (Abboud, 2020, p. 8). Thus,

prefigurative reconstruction plans have inaccurately perceived Assad's Syria as receptive and constitutive of liberal goals.

The possibility of enacting such liberal goals is highly unlikely, interveners in the conflict are not able to exercise similar forms of power and are unable to counter the regime's 'currency' of hard power through means of soft power, whether diplomatic, financial, or economic, and international actors are thus not able to 'craft peace' (Abboud, 2020, p. 14; Batrawi, 2020, p.1). Furthermore, international cooperation with the Syrian regime so far has only led to the collaboration of implementing authoritarian and illiberal practices; the provision of state resources only leads to distribution "along bifurcated lines between the loyal and disloyal, thus reinforcing regime power" (Abboud, 2020, p. 13). Henceforth, internationally led reconstruction plans for Syria should not be initiated or implemented because it lacks the leverage to adequately influence the short- and long-term future of Syria and to avoid contributing to the consolidation of current authoritarian and wartime economic structures (Bank 2019; Batrawi, 2020, p. 1). Heydemann (2018), however, affirms that while the reality of the Syrian case may be troubling for practitioners of reconstruction, they do provide an opportunity to question "the fundamental utility of fragility as a concept" (p. 16), thereby prompting necessary reflection on how future reconstruction practices may be improved.

Meanwhile, Iranian and Russian have more vested interests in Syria's reconstruction process; however, this process has been fragmented (van Veen, 2019, p. 33). Russia has been at the forefront of contributing to the "increasingly influential discourse of 'authoritarian' or 'illiberal' peace…. [where] peace is understood as hierarchically informed order, with narrowly defined legitimate agency, constraining who has the moral

right to speak and act in situations of conflict" and thus serves as an effective partner for Assad (Lewis, 2017, p. 35). Russian efforts throughout the reconstruction process seek to consolidate the Assad regime and help it gain international legitimacy (Itani, 2019, p. 31). Iranian and Russian interests in Syria's conflict management, however, no longer align in the reconstruction phase. Iran's aim does not concern itself with reintegrating Syria within the global order or by ensuring Syria has the funds to ensure reconstruction; instead, it remains fixated on countering Israel (Itani, 2019, p. 31). Henceforth, Syria's reliance on Russia is concentrated. Russia has made attempts at convincing states in the region, such as the United Arab Emirate and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to contribute to Syria's reconstruction. However, while these states have an interest in providing funds to counteract the influence of the Turkish-Qatari alliance, as well as Iranian influence, they are cautious about doing so due to the risk of US sanctions since the Caesar Act recently came into force (Mardasov & Korotayev, 2021, p. 228).

4 Where to From Here?

The non-linear approach to peace in Syria has lengthened and exacerbated the already harrowing experiences of conflict. The lived reality for millions of Syrians, including its diaspora, is marked by violence. The authoritarian practice of binary othering has since been embedded into the very structure of society, including its walls and minds. As of yet, and in line with authoritarian conflict management, no transition processes have been initiated by the Assad regime that focuses on accountability or reconciliation. Transitional justice processes have, to the small extent possible, been initiated outside of Syria by NGOs. It is important to note that the conflict in Syria was experienced differently based on the local dynamics and actors; memories and experiences are both shared but also distinctive, thereby giving rise to multiple 'Syrias' (Al-Kahwati & Selimovic, 2021, p. 6).

The authenticity of representation is crucial, and while members of grassroots society may represent Syrians, they do not necessarily equal as ‘the people’ of Syria. Indeed, Wedeen (2019) acknowledges the so-called grey people, *al-ramadiyyin*, who were essentially ‘in between’ the two camps of reform and order. This recognition of ambivalence is powerful because it provides insight into a less obvious side of conflict experiences. This ambivalent middle is nonetheless part of the ‘civic solidarity’ who will questions whether and how Assad will, or will not, be let off the hook (Kochanski & Quinn, 2021, p. 5). These questions do not necessarily have to lead to radical action, but they are nonetheless part of a process to help Syrians deal with their experiences of conflict. Furthermore, as the Syrian government will, in the coming years of rule, seek to deny, contort, and misrepresent its active involvement in the civil war, collective memory will become an essential resource for Syrians.

Especially for Syrians hopeful of future reform and holding the Assad regime accountable, collective memories and documentation serve as an important resource that they can draw upon in the future. As elaborated on by al-Haj Saleh (2017):

> “the courage, sacrifice, and collective spirit that characterise the uprising are certain to eventually constitute a national experience… a regime capable of engaging in a war against the rebellion of the governed is entirely incapable of fighting a war against their memories. The regime may be able to overcome the intifada by force, but such a victory will only mark the first round in a longer struggle, one in which Syrians will already have recourse to a sophisticate memory of exceptional experiences, a source of support for them in any future rounds of their liberation struggle” (p. 47).

The revolution, for many, is, therefore, on pause. Al-Khalili (2021), informed by her fieldwork, defines the Syrian revolution (*al-thawra*) as 'moving' in the sense that it is continually "shifting, as well as being in motion". Henceforth, it does not follow that the revolution has failed. Instead, the revolution is a "transformative, multi-scalar, and multi-dimensional force" that, despite not effecting the desired change at the political level, nonetheless was able to significantly impact the way the Syrian state functions in an irreversible way (al-Khalili, 2021). The author, therefore, speaks of a defeat rather than a failure of the revolution because it has not ended. Al-Khalili (2021) describes how, for some Syrians involved in the revolution, "there was thus a continuity between the political struggles they fought for and the social transformations they experienced… even in regions retaken by the regime a more radical revolution could happen, even if only after a generation". The question that remains is whether Syrians who are hopeful of the revolution waking up again will still be freely situated within the borders of an Assad-led authoritarian Syria, as opposed to exiled, forcibly displaced, detained in prison, or deceased.

Conclusion

In summary, the case of Syria presents an example of a regime performing authoritarian norms of peacebuilding that is indicative of new forms of geopolitical power implementing alternative models of post-conflict order. As implemented by Bashar al-Assad, these norms are centred around exclusion, the continuation of violence, and a rejection of the liberal peace process. By drawing upon its existing base of authoritarian and illiberal practices, the Assad regime is able to effectively utilise authoritarian conflict management to intensify its strategy of binary othering on which to exercise sectarian-infused practices of discrimination and violence to consolidate its power and subsequent legitimacy. As stated

by al-Haj Saleh (2017), “the violence of the Assad regime is structural because it stems from its formation, and violence is preferential – a first choice, not the last” (p. 169). The situation in Syria, from an authoritarian resilience perspective, ‘necessitates’ the use of force by Assad, but the position Assad has carved out for himself allows him unfettered access to the use of force, and so he makes use of it to entrench his power further; the legitimacy and validity of which stemming from this ability to wield such influence. Henceforth, Assad’s power and legitimacy is precariously held together, but held together, nonetheless.

A short modern history of the Syrian state has demonstrated how Hafez al-Assad laid down the groundwork for the authoritarian state his son, Bashar, would inherit. From this history, it is apparent that the intense solidification of power by Hafez is in part a response to the tumultuous political conditions in which he gained power. Henceforth, Hafez managed to achieve a semblance of stability. As the regime was passed on to Bashar, a number of challenges arose, particularly in the economic sphere. Henceforth, the Syrian state apparatus was in need of reform, which is enacted through a process of authoritarian upgrading, which in turn upset the balance of previously enacted authoritarian practices. This created key vulnerabilities that, amongst other grievances, were exploited during the uprisings. The violent response, in an attempt to quell the uprisings, only led to more protests, eventually turning into a revolution. Unable to suppress his subjects, Assad increasingly intensified authoritarian and illiberal practices as a means to manage the now civil war. He was able to do so effectively enough through discursive, spatial and economic practices to remain in power. However, the authoritarian conflict management practices, alongside military action, have resulted in dire conditions for the Syrian people. Drawing upon sectarianism as a tool of control, Assad instilled the binary othering of loyal

and disloyal through which he seeks to assert dominance. It is, in effect, an extreme way to remove any and all opponents of the regime. Whilst present through all stages of the conflict, it is becoming entrenched within the reconstruction phase. As stated by Imady (2019), “reconstruction that is based on demographic distortions is similar to reconstruction that is based on physical distortions” (p. 17). Henceforth, the practice of binary othering will have irreversible effects on Syrian society.

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