

# The Syrian Uprising and Social Movements Theory

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The Syrian Uprising is indeed a puzzle. After both Egyptians and Tunisians overthrew their respective dictators, an uprising in Syria was still contrary to many experts and analysts' beliefs; it was predicted that Syrians would not follow the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt due to the lack of "structures that could enable people to organize themselves and rally others" (Abdulhamid, 2011). One of these scholars was David Lesch, a Professor of Middle East History at Trinity University, who is claimed to know Assad better than any other Westerner. He asserts in his book, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, that after the Syrians failed to mobilize in the following weeks of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, this seemed "to confirm the almost universal predictions of analyst, commentators, diplomats and scholars (including this one) that the Arab Spring would not come to Syria any time soon or in any significant way" (2012, 54). However, on March 25, 2011, large demonstrations in Syria spread nation-wide. In response, President Bashar al-Assad mobilized his coercive apparatus and repressed against the protestors. After months of repressive means against protestors, parts of the Syrian military left to join the opposition movement, which created the present situation in Syria, a civil war. For scholars of the Syrian Uprising, it is thus critical to ask two questions. First, what were the underlying factors that initially demanded an uprising in Syria? Second, what factors explain why the Syrian Uprising has not yet been successful? This paper will argue that Syria had many of the socio-economic and political problems that were also found in Tunisia and Egypt, but that these factors alone cannot explain the uprising. Thus, a crucial part of this analysis will look at the political opportunity the Syrian's had for mobilization and argue that despite massive repression from the government, demonstrations occurred – largely due to social networks in the Deera region, as well as how the citizens' grievances were framed. Furthermore, this paper will attack the question of the lack of success in the Syrian Uprising by arguing that it is due to the patrimonial military organisation that the Syrian opposition has not yet succeeded in breaking the regime.

### Part 1

#### *1.1: Underlying Factors for an Uprising*

What is considered to be the initial spark of the Syrian Uprising was the arrest of 15 school children in Deera, a rural city located in southern Syria. Young students had written "Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam," or "down with the regime" – an Arabic slogan that became popular to use in many countries of the Arab Spring – on a school wall (Hirst, 2011). The arrest served as a spark to a movement, much like the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi ignited the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and indeed the Arab Spring itself. These events clearly reflect some grief in the respective populations, and these grievances are indeed important in explaining mobilization. Thus, the shared set of grievances that functions as a foundation of a movement, or "mobilizing grievances," a term developed by Snow and Soule (2010, 24), will be thoroughly analyzed below.

Firstly, let us consider the mobilizing grievances of the Syrian Uprising. What is imperative to assess, before diving into empirical evidence in Syria, is why an analysis of grievances really matters. Indeed, many scholars have to a certain degree neglected the importance of grievances as a factor that spurs mobilization. A common assumption among scholars is that grievances will always exist everywhere, so there must be other factors that are more likely to trigger mass mobilization. Conversely, this is rejected by Snow and Soule, who explain that although individual grievances may not create a revolution, shared grievances, or mobilizing grievances in a population will most certainly actuate "joint, ameliorative action" (2010, 26). One of the approaches they consider is the "Absolute Deprivation or Immiseration Thesis" – a thesis which proposes that people living in acute and desperate conditions,

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“such as the lack of affordable housing, widespread unemployment, inaccessible health care, extreme poverty, epidemic health problems, and disabling discrimination,” will eventually mobilize due to their grievances.

These conditions were absolutely present in rural Syria pre-mobilization, and the grievances can be summarized to be a disappointment in the Assad regime for failing to deliver to the rural poor what they were promised. As Suzanne Saleeby suggests, “a deeper look into resource inequity as opposed to mere resource scarcity illuminates the ongoing social and economic stratification that have helped push to Syria’s foreground specific political grievances” (2012). Hafez al-Assad, former Syrian President, and father of Bashar, the current President, himself from peasant background, had promised to put Syria’s peasants “at the top of its policy agenda” (Saleeby, 2012). However, despite the development that resulted from Hafez’ socialistic and nationalistic policy, Syria fell into an economic crisis in the 1980s. The plan for the regime to solve its “economic vulnerabilities,” was privatization. Additionally, after the Soviet Union fell, aid directed towards Syria declined. Thus, when Hafez died in 2000, Bashar inherited a Syria with many economic problems (Hinnebusch, 2012). What was clear for both Bashar and the Syrian government was that an economic reform was crucial. Initially, Bashar sought to adapt a Chinese-style “social market economy” where the regime would expand “the public sector while reforming rather than privatizing the public sector” (Hinnebusch, 2012). However as Hinnebusch notes, although this reform seemed economically clever and would also be in line with the socialistic nature of Ba’athist (Hafez and Bashar’s political party) ideology – there was no strategy in place to implement such a policy. Thus, the reform’s failure left a “vacuum which neo-liberalism and Islamism would compete to fill,” – a direction that would lead to economic growth, but neglect equality and distribution (Hinnebusch, 2012).

Indeed, Syria as whole shared grievances due to this new economic direction. In rural areas, farmers and other agricultural workers lost their subsidies from the government. In the cities and suburbs, economic liberalization gave opportunities for real estate investment, which ultimately benefited many of the Syrian bourgeoisie, as well as affluent foreigners. However, many Syrians, who had lived on state-owned properties for decades, were now homeless as their properties were sold to investors (Hinnebusch, 2012). These changes were also asserted by David Lesch, who notes that “economic growth in Syria for 2003 was approximately 3 percent, which is too low to create enough jobs for the growing population, especially among 15 to 24- year-olds...where unemployment is estimated at about 30 percent.” Furthermore, in 2010 over 30 percent of Syria’s population was living below the poverty line, as well as 11 percent were living below the subsistence level (Lesch, 2012, 57). *Summa summarum*, the clear socio-economic problems that existed in Syria seemed to fit what Snow and Soule’s forward in their Absolute Deprivation or Immiseration Thesis to spark mobilization. However, the two authors hold that such grievances cannot alone account for a revolution. In their book, they quote a study by Zawadski and Lazarsfeld from the 1930s: “The experiences of unemployment [frustration, discontent, grievance] is a preliminary step for the revolutionary mood, but...they do not lead by themselves to a readiness for mass action. Metaphorically speaking, these experiences only fertilize the ground for revolution, but do not generate it.” (Snow & Soule, 2010, 62)

## 1.2: Political Opportunities and Structures of the Movement

It is thus evident that the socio-economic context in Syria before demonstrations commenced in 2011 was an important motivational factor for the uprising. However, as stated above, this only explains the foundation for the movement and cannot explain fully why Syrians mobilized and demonstrated against the Assad regime. The important question posed in this section of the paper is why, despite the repressive means the regime used to control the small demonstrations that occurred in March of 2011, demonstrations continued to grow and spread further to other cities.

What many social movement scholars focus on when analyzing a movement is the environment in which movements occur. The main focus for many scholars is to consider the political opportunity or freedom individuals have to mobilize. As Snow and Soule note, “the point is that social movements have a great difficulty reaching out and mobilizing various kinds of support in the absence of a political context that allows for the free and open expression of collective grievances and claims, even when they run counter to the interest of the system of authority being challenged.” (2010, 66) This may seem like truism for some; it is obvious that people are more likely to express their grievances in an open society, where the costs for protesting are few or none. However, a study conducted by Peter Eisinger, on the variation of protests in forty-three American cities, shows that protests do not most often occur in an

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open society, but rather in a society that is mixed between open and closed (Snow & Soule, 2010, 68). Syria, however, are more closed than open, and because of this, the regime will not tolerate demonstrations. A common characteristic among more closed states is that demonstrations are often shut down repressively. This was as true in the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in 1989, as it was when Syrians mobilized in 2011.

Nevertheless, albeit the similarity in the repressive means of the Chinese and Syrian government in the two instances, they differ in outcome. While the Chinese students who participated in protests in Tiananmen Square eventually had to give up due to massive repression, the Syrian protestors have continued. It is therefore critical to note that although protests can occur in the same context, they may not have the same outcome. Indeed, for this reason, a closer analysis of demonstrations in repressive contexts is vital for this present analysis. Much research has focused on mobilization in these contexts. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1856 on the French Revolution, "when a people which has put up with an oppressive rule over a long period without protest suddenly finds the government relaxing its pressure, it takes up arms against it" (Kurzman, 2009). However, Syria's mukhabarat, or security services, did not seem to relax its pressure. Rather, the mukhabarat was indeed highly active at the time of protests in Syria. The service itself consists of 50,000-70,000 officers and in 2011 "there was one intelligence officer for roughly 240 people" (Lesch, 2012, 65). When people mobilized after the arrest of the school children in Deraa, the mukhabarat opened fire and killed four of the protestors. When the protests grew to 20,000, the security forces attacked the protestors again, killing 15 and wounding hundreds. Additionally, electricity, water and mobile phone networks were cut off in Deera (Lesch, 2012, 56-57). The Syrian government did not show the protestors any moment of weakness. Yet, their repression proved to spur even more protests.

One scholar that has particularly focused his research on social movements in this repressive context is Charles Kurzman. His study of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 shows that the Iranian state was, like Syria, not "particularly vulnerable to revolution in 1978" (Kurzman, 2009). Rather, what made people continue to protest in Iran was not that they believed the regime had weakened, but that "the Iranian people considered political opportunities to have increased as a result of the growth of the opposition." In other words, although the Iranian people did not have any political opportunity to protest against the state, their perception of the political opportunity was what drove them to continue. What led Syrians to demonstrate may be comparable to Kurzman's analysis of the Iranian Revolution, but such a conclusion demands an analysis of how the Syrian protestors may come to think that they can bring down the regime.

A factor that can explain the roots of such a perception of political opportunity is social networks. Studies of such networks prove that human relations or networks between people may give people the perception that the threat the regime poses are smaller than it indeed is, and that the opposition are stronger than they really are. These social networks give individuals more incentives to join a movement. One prominent social movement theorist, Doug McAdam, notes that the ultimate decision to participate in a movement would depend on four limiting conditions: (1) the occurrence of a specific recruiting attempt, (2) the successful linkage of movement and identity, (3) support of that linkage from persons who normally serve to sustain the identity in question, and (4) the absence of strong opposition from others on whom other salient identities depend" (McAdam & Poulsen, 1993).

On the social networks in Syria, this present article will rely heavily on research from Reinoud Leenders, a King's College professor whose focus is especially on Social Movement Theory and the Syrian Uprising. By studying the social networks of the city of Deera, where the Syrian Uprising initially started, Leenders hold that a conclusion can be reached to explain why Syrians mobilized despite the repressive means of the regime. Despite the solid nature of the regime, the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt clearly established a perception among Syrians that they could do the same. It is thus argued that it is the social networks that are primarily able to spread the "demonstration effects" from Tunisia and Egypt, to the people of Deera (Leenders, 2013).

Deera is characterized with many different social networks. Firstly, the city has a family clan structure, where the seven major clans of the city provide citizens with "solidarity, identity and socio-economic coping or survival" (Leenders, 2013). In other words, the aforementioned socio-economic grievances were largely dealt with by the family clans, which again gave more incentives to resist the Assad regime. Another critical network in Deera is the labor migration network, where workers travel both within Syria and to the neighboring countries of Lebanon and

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Jordan. But it is not only labor migrants that network beyond the Syrian border. Leenders note that there are indeed “strong family or clan ties” in Deera and parts of Jordan, as well as they are linked economically by trading agricultural products. Finally, Leenders notes that Deera’s citizens’ “involvement in crime or illegal activity, because of its banned nature and its social organization, generates particular skills, resources, social relations and a social space embedded in networks” (Leenders, 2013). To explain why these networks spurred mobilization, Leenders suggests that a look at the framing of the regime repression is critical; the way the protestors of Deera framed their grievances, through slogans and cries, is what initially would encourage many to join the protests. Leenders note that the slogans and the cries “had an almost intoxicating effect on protestors as several expressed profound delight in instantly recognizing their own longstanding grievances in what was now displayed and shared publicly for the very first time” (Leenders, 2013). Thus, it seems prudent to conclude that grievances that existed in Syria and the social networks that helped spread these grievances were the most important factors for explaining mobilization in Syria.

## Part 2

### *2: Syria and the Personalist Regime*

Despite successes in both Egypt and Tunisia in overthrowing the respective regimes, this success has been absent in Syria. The social movement developed into a civil war, which is also the current status of the conflict. There are a number of factors that can explain the lack of success for the opposition. This paper, however, will only focus on one: Syria’s regime type. Many social movement scholars, among them Jack Goldstone, put an emphasis on the regime structure in explaining the variety of outcomes in revolutions or uprisings. In particular, such scholars argue that it is due to the variety in the regime structure that protests in Tunisia and Egypt made their respective autocrats leave office, while the autocratic leaders in Libya and Syria sought war instead of retreat. Additionally, it is important to view a regime’s production of oil, as well as its place in the international system, for deeper analysis of the outcomes of an uprising.

The Assad regime in Syria can be conceptualized as a personalist or sultanist regime; a type of regime that is considered to be both very strong and very vulnerable. Goldstone describes such regimes as modern states with a party structure, “but in fact a single powerful person rules society through an extensive system of personal patronage, rather than obedience to impersonal laws” (2003). Such regimes consist also of many politicized elites, where the autocratic leader must serve as a broker among them. Moreover, the military’s loyalty towards the regime may vary, as that loyalty “depends on the workings of the patronage system” (Goldstone, 2003). Although such regimes are considered to be strong, their stability is solely based on the political wins of the personalist leader. This is contrary to monarchies, for instance, where the monarchic leaders have a strong and tradition-based legitimacy. When the leader loses its legitimacy, as has gradually happened to Assad during his first decade as president, some scholars focus especially on the structures of the military in explaining the sustainability of the regime. One of these scholars is Eva Bellin, who in 2012 wrote an article reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East. Her article can be effectively used in explaining why the Syrian military did not turn against the Assad regime, like the Egyptian military did. It is argued that this variation is largely due to the structure of the military. In Egypt and Tunisia, it was not due to the lack of military capacity that the military refused to shoot on the protestors, it was rather due to will. Any military leader must in such situations consider different imperatives. Bellin notes that “using lethal force against civilians threatens to undermine the image of the military as defender of the nation, especially if the crowds are representative of the “nation” and cannot be dismissed as distinctly “other” along class, sectarian, or ethnic lines” (Bellin, 2012). Albeit Syria’s heterogeneous society, Bellin focuses mostly on the military structure in explaining why the Syrian military decided to shoot on its citizens. Syria has a very robust coercive apparatus, where the military is patrimonially organized; the military consists mainly of Alawi (the religious group, based in Shia Islam, which the Assad family is a member of). For instance, Syria’s Fourth Brigade is fully Alawi, and the Republican Guard is lead by Bashar’s brother Maher al-Assad (Bellin, 2012). Thus, as the regime must rely on the military for its survival, it becomes critical that the military does not have any incentives in parting itself from the regime. In the Syrian context, the military’s existence depends upon regime survival, so a major defect was unlikely to occur. It was only a small portion of defectors that established the Free Syrian Army, the established military force fighting against the Assad regime.

Furthermore, to sustain this patrimonial organized state, it is argued oil can play a crucial role in explaining the

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regime survival. Although Syria is only a minor oil producer, it is noted by Goldstone that oil gave the regime a substantial source of revenue. Oil money was used to “retain support in the core urban areas of Damascus and Aleppo, and to send its army against the urban revolts in other regions.” (Goldstone, 2013) Next, the Assad regime has also relied heavily on Russia and China’s principle of non-intervention in the UN Security Council. It has also enjoyed support from primarily Iran and Hezbollah. Iran assisted the Syrian military with 4,000 soldiers from their own Revolutionary Guard (Fisk, 2013). Further, Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, stated that the war against the rebel forces “is our battle, and we are up to it” (Barnard, 2012).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has answered the two questions posed in the introduction by highlighting that (1) people mobilized in Syria, despite massive repression from the regime, due to the social networks and framing of the regime’s repressive nature, but (2) they have not succeeded in breaking the regime due to the patrimonial organized military, that have no incentives in abandoning the regime. Because of the social networks and framings, Syrians established a perception that they, united, could stand up and express their grievances and fight the Assad regime. This was argued to be similar to Kurzman’s analysis of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The social networks, like the family clans, labor networks, trading networks or criminal networks, made it easier for the individuals of Deera to express their grievances. How they framed the repressive means of the regime functioned to ignite the hope and spirit of the people of Deera. Nevertheless, although protests spread around the country, there has been no success in breaking the regime. Due to the closely tied military, oil revenues and international allies, the Assad regime has been able to stay in power and it is highly uncertain if or when it will eventually break.

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