
The Fall of Democracy in Syria

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Abstract

This paper analyses social, economic and political factors during the years between Syria's independence (1946) and its unification with Egypt (1958) that led to the fall of democracy. Despite the achievements of hard-won sovereignty and the establishment of liberal institutions following 1946, the country faced numerous obstacles to democratic consolidation. Bitter social conflicts, aggravated by a deep sense of insecurity among the Syrian population, in combination with economic disparities and military intervention, led to the destabilization of the state. During its formative years, the country was not immune to anti-colonial and social unrest and Cold War rivalries. As a means to overcome these challenges, the young democracy embarked on a path of defensive modernization elevating the army to political power.

In order to identify the reasons behind the fall of Syria's democracy, this paper analyses factors such as: social conflict, institutional weakness, the rise of radical parties, the politicization of the military and the role of an unfavorable external environment. The essay draws attention to changes in class such as the weakening of Syria's liberal elites whose legitimacy diminished as they failed to meet the

challenges posed by late industrialization and foreign competition. Particular importance is attributed to the birth of a new middle class, radicalized by political parties directed against oligarchy and imperialism. This paper assumes that the democratic breakdown in Syria can be seen as a consequence of both internal developments and external pressures.

Key Words

Democratic breakdown, post-independence Syria, United Arab Republic, defensive modernization, political legitimacy.

Introduction

In the late 1940s, Syria's newly gained independence showed that establishing a viable state is an enormous challenge. After centuries of colonial domination, the government was expected to efficiently perform its function of providing territorial and social security. As Linz and Stepan point out:¹ a democratic system, in order to be sustainable, has to provide a minimum provision of economic resources. Foreign economic competition, regional conflicts

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and Cold War rivalry added further strain to the already arduous task of forming a stable and responsive government. Bitter conflicts provoked by social disparities led to the destabilization of the state. Diverse concepts of the shape of the country caused rivalry among authority representatives in Syria's definition process. Post-independence elites, pan-Arabs, Nasserists and socialist parties – all competed to shape the pathway of Syrian political and economic development.

Arab unity was seen as a way to secure social and economic development.

This paper will examine the factors that led to the undermining of Syria's democratic system and caused the transition to authoritarian rule. After a brief introduction to the question of identity in the newly created state, the paper will analyze the determinants that allowed the disintegration of democratic structures, such as the crumbling of Syria's liberal elites, social conflict, and the radicalization of a new class, the rise of radical parties and the influence of external factors and defensive modernization. It will concentrate on the external threat and intense social conflict that preceded the United Arab Republic (UAR).

There are various interpretations of the reasons behind the democratic breakdown in Syria. Moubayed² claims that attempts to overthrow the government led by Cold War rivals

sympathizing with either of the two sides destroyed Syria's chances for a stable democracy. Such focus on international conspiracies is criticized by Heydemann.³ Heydemann contradicts Moubayed in saying that the collapse of democracy in Syria was not caused "by intrigues of foreign powers but by the dynamics of Syria's political economy"⁴. Against this theoretical background, this paper reflects a dual preoccupation with both the endogenous and exogenous factors that caused Syria's democratic breakdown. It argues that a simultaneous calculus of external threats and internal division brought the regime down. A combination of social factors and an unfavorable external environment had a determining role in the failure of Syria's democratic consolidation.

Its long history of colonialism, and the evidence of foreign meddling in its internal affairs, including support for military coups, shows that Syria's domestic policies were influenced not only by internal power struggles, but also by inter-Arab relations and Cold War competition. After the West supported the formation of Israel and the Suez war, Syrian enmity towards the West became even stronger and the Soviet Union gradually began to counter Western influence in Syria. Arms deals and other forms of economic cooperation strengthened Syria's left-wing elements and violently brought social issues back on the agenda.

In this paper I concentrate on the period before Syria's union with Nasserist Egypt, which practically brought an end

to the brief democratic interval, rather than on the events directly preceding the 1963 Ba'ath coup. Instead, I analyze the factors that allowed for the coup to occur and that led indirectly to authoritarianism.

Question of Identity

The particular historic context is crucial to understanding Syria's democratic interlude. The birth of the Syrian state ensued as a result of the nationalist struggle against imperialism, which radicalised nationalist sentiments in Syria.⁵ An arbitrary delineation of borders by the colonial powers and the resulting territorial losses of historic Syria - Palestine, Alexandretta, the Bequa valley and parts of the Mediterranean coast - left ambitions for Greater Syria unfulfilled. The historic, cultural and political bonds among the divided states paved the way for radical movements; Pan-Arabist, Islamist and nationalist ideologies were so deeply rooted in Syrian minds that public opinion would not tolerate divergence from Arab nationalism.⁶ Although since 1946 the focus of Syrian political life has shifted from the nationalist struggle to the challenge of constructing a viable state, nationalism has remained a dominant current in Syrian politics. The main objective of Arab nationalism was to compensate for colonial humiliation by reuniting divided Arab territories. This mindset provided ideological support for the union with Egypt. In

a burst of Pan-Arab euphoria, control of liberal institutions was ceded to authoritarian Egypt. Arab unity was seen as a way to secure social and economic development. The minorities in Syria were particularly susceptible to the Pan-Arab ideology, as a way of safeguarding their status and security. They radicalised because of a "double vulnerability": the threat of foreign invasion and danger to their domestic position from the Sunni majority.

Weakness of Liberal Elites

In the 1940s, Syria was dominated by a group of fifty prominent families of landed aristocracy, who had unrivalled power both in economic and political terms derived from owning land in the country and holding important public offices in the cities. Nevertheless, the aforementioned social tensions, lack of reforms and marginalization of some social groups led to the "explosive disintegration of the oligarchic order."⁷

For the most part absentee landlords, they did not develop a sense of social and political responsibility toward the countryside.

The veteran nationalists lacked popular support from the very beginning. The leadership of the members of the National Bloc was questioned due to

unsuccessful treaty negotiations with the French which failed to prevent losses of Syria's historic territory and left the country with a currency still attached to the franc.

In terms of Max Weber's criteria for political legitimacy,⁸ the notables lacked traditional authority for their position. They had acquired land in the later phase of Ottoman rule and became enriched through trade opportunities brought about by World War II. For the most part absentee landlords, they did not develop a sense of social and political responsibility toward the countryside. The leading parties were elitist, had little contact with the masses, and were not representative of a nation composed of almost two thirds peasants.

The post-independence government did not live up to various political pressures, such as long term and unsuccessful involvement in regional conflicts, the failure of a state-led economic development project, bureaucratic corruption, rising foreign debt and high inflation, unemployment and high levels of domestic repression.⁹ Syria's National Bloc was a broad, heterogeneous grouping united against a common enemy - the French. After fulfilling the task of negotiating independence and drafting a constitution, the divergence of opinions and projects for the future of a Syrian state within the bloc became apparent. In Michael Aflaq's words:

To understand the bankruptcy of the Bloc one must appreciate that the men

of whom it was composed had no overall view; their ambition was restricted to their own political survival and a limited degree of independence for the country. They lagged a long way behind public opinion, particularly to the young, who had for several years been subject to Ba'ath and Communist ideas. The Ba'ath gave the public wider ambitions, on both the social and national plan.¹⁰

The People's Party represented no real alternative to the National Bloc— it was compromised in the public eye by its link with Iraq and ties with feudal interests. Public discourse focused on progress rather than democracy. Of major concern was defense of class and national interests, and not the protection of a democratic regime.¹¹

The Ba'athists and Communists began to succeed in gaining more control over the National Front and People's Party.

The divided parties were unable to undertake the far-reaching reforms that were needed to improve Syria's social, economic, and political structure. The National and People's Party offered a vague political program that concentrated mostly on "reminding the public of its patriotic achievements under the Mandate"¹². The common opponent shared a mutual interest in the maintenance of the old order and did not encourage conservative minded notables to cooperate to counter the radicals. The Ba'athists and Communists began to succeed in gaining more control over

the National Front and People's Party. A constitutional amendment, permitting Quwatli's re-election for a second five-year term, not only undermined their 'rational legal authority' belief in the importance of democratic norms, which could be amended just to keep someone in power, but also obstructed the reform process. Lack of reforms in due time conducted to the democratic breakdown fourteen months later.¹³

The elections of 1954, reformed by the introduction of a secret ballot, represented Syria's return to parliamentary rule after a period of military dictatorship.

The elections of 1954, reformed by the introduction of a secret ballot, represented Syria's return to parliamentary rule after a period of military dictatorship. A comparison of Syria's free, democratic elections shows the significance of the socio-political change. 1949 brought the success of the conservatives: out of the 114 seats, most seats were won by the People's Party, but the National Party with far fewer deputies formed a coalition with the independents. Very few seats were allocated to radical parties. In 1954 the balance began to swing in favor of leftwing elements, notably the Ba'ath Party with 22 seats, compared to only one five years earlier. A shift in power was visible from a class perspective: in 1949

six out of seven deputies from Hama were landlords, while at the election of 1954, only one landowner won, with six representatives coming from the peasant opposition.¹⁴ Despite the radical parties' relative success, the People's Party still managed to win the most votes and the National Party scored 19 seats.

A large number of independent Members of Parliament with unclear political affinities decried the weakness of the political party system – family, religion, or place of birth were the decisive factors in electing a representative, rather than a common ideology.¹⁵ With only a loose party discipline and large numbers of independents, the parliament's decisions were prone to variations. It became obvious that numerous non-allied MPs could play a powerful, but at the same time an unpredictable role in the Parliament. The large number of independent deputies is indicative of trust not being put mainly in institutions or even groups, but in individuals, proving Huntington's theory that the main problem in democratic consolidations lies not in introducing an electoral process, but in advancing loyalty to the institutions.

An analysis of the elections shows that both in 1949 and 1954 the Chamber was weak, sharply divided and lacking leadership. There was no clear majority or even a possibility of achieving a workable coalition. Syria's divided parliament could not aspire to presidential leadership. Quwatli, re-elected in 1955, was seen as a weak

politician, unable to give the country a sense of direction, and he had been unpopular with the army since 1948. The multiparty cabinet of Sabri Al-Asali, consisting of two Ba'athists, three Populists, two members of the Liberal Democratic Bloc, two from the Constitutional Bloc and two Nationalists, failed to cooperate and led to a yet another parliamentary crisis. Between 1946 and 1956 Syria had twenty different cabinets and drafted four separate constitutions which destabilized the democratic system.

Social Conflict

Sharp social conflict can be regarded as a major source of instability and a factor leading to regime change. In the period between 1946 and 1958 Syria was a country of vast disparities, with one of the lowest development levels in the region and a backward economy primarily based on agriculture. Its rural and urban areas contrasted in extreme terms. Post-war prosperity did not alleviate deep economic inequality. Only the upper and middle classes stood to benefit from wider access to education, urbanization and modernization, which did not reach the workers or peasants, further widening the gap between the rich and the poor.¹⁶

Linz and Stepan draw attention to economy as a key factor in preserving democracy, stating that tensions associated with economic conditions such as unemployment, high inflation and lags in the reorganization of industry

often trigger democratic breakdown and political transition.¹⁷ This was partly the case in Syria, where the advantages of democracy and independence were questioned in the absence of economic improvements, for lack of which politicians and economists were blamed.¹⁸ The Government was heavily criticized for poor economic conditions, such as overcrowded villages lacking the basic amenities of modern life and a higher cost of living than in neighboring countries. And although Syria had considerable economic potential, praised by a World Bank report, its lack of improvements in working conditions with frequent wage cuts and high unemployment rates became a source of a socio-political conflict.¹⁹

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The Government was seen as unable to provide neither protection from external threats nor even a minimum provision of social security. High taxation and exorbitant prices led to pervasive social discontent. Many investors chose to conduct their enterprises in Lebanon, due to Syria's administrative lag, high tariffs and poor infrastructure.²⁰ Moreover, the Syrian leadership was questioned about its spending. Ten large development projects that started out

without expertise were overcapitalized and did not influence competitiveness of Syria's nascent industry.²¹

The 1948 Arab-Israeli war had serious repercussions for Syria's internal affairs. It exposed the state's weaknesses and lack of preparation, and the disjuncture between a political discourse promising early victory and the harsh reality that ensued. The misled public felt bitter disappointment with their leaders. The war discredited Quwatli, who had shown himself indecisive in times of crisis and unable to form a strong Government. Voices of concern were raised that the democratic system was losing credibility, and the real cause for the mobilization of the masses was not Palestine but rather ineffective governance.²² After the 1948 war, the domestic situation in Syria worsened, as prices shot up and finances based on an unstable currency still tied to the French franc passed into a disastrous condition.

Radicalization of a New Class

Peasants politicized by the desire to obtain land and disheartened by the lack of the landlord class' authority demanded broader and more radical reforms.²³ They could not, however, produce lasting, radical change on their own. The main revolutionary force was an alliance between the middle class and peasants who gave support to radical parties.²⁴ Under the rule of the urban notables, other classes were denied social

ascend and political leverage. Only a few representatives of the new class managed to gain a seat in parliament or other political institutions, overcoming nepotism, corruption, and "a nearly invincible network of coalitions between the notable families"²⁵. As formal channels of influencing politics were closed, the new middle class yearned for a revolution that would give them access to power. In the landlord-peasant conflict, the new middle class was the force that tipped the balance in favor of the latter.

The new middle class consisted of public sector workers, soldiers, teachers, technicians, journalists, lawyers and others. Between the years of 1939 and 1947 the number of civil servants had increased threefold, making salaries the biggest area of state spending, constituting more than a half of the budget.²⁶ Mainly salaried by the state, the new class was not self-reliant and needed a strong government as main broker.²⁷ Heavy dependency on the state was assumed to hinder the functioning of stable democracy which requires a strong, independent civil society, principally based on the middle class.

Rise of Radical Parties: Nationalism and Pan-Arabism

A decline in the influence of the conservatives left the political scene open for progressive parties to emerge. From the beginning of the late forties, radical

parties began to establish their influence across a wide spectrum of Syrian society. Ideological parties included the Ba'ath Party, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP), the People's Party, the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Youth Party. These parties found support among classes which contested the oligarchic order and sought to restructure Syrian society. Radical parties mobilized peasants and workers, but it was the radicalization of the new middle classes that brought them to power. Ideological parties benefited from the conflicts among diverse political elements of the country, promising Syrian development through Arab political and economic unity. Radical change was seen as a way of modernizing the country so that it could compete with the West.²⁸ The Pan-Arab nationalist ideology adopted by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party fell on fertile ground after the creation of the state of Israel. Moreover, condemnation of sectarian and confessional cleavages made the Ba'ath Party particularly popular among the minorities who hoped for social ascent. Party supporters were recruited through two cross-sectarian institutions: education and the military. Most cadets from the 'generation of high expectations' were completely politicized by the time they entered the military academy.²⁹

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Although the radical groups were very active and increasingly influential, they still could not gain power through democratic means. Even at the height of its electoral success in 1955, the Ba'ath party controlled only 19 of the 142 seats in the Parliament. Not finding any way to preserve its position through domestic manipulation, the party turned to Egypt's President Gamal Abdul Nasser for help.

Defensive Modernization

Syria embraced modernization mainly as a way of improving its military position in the Middle East. The theory of 'defensive modernization'³⁰ is based on economic, political and military competition between states for positions in the international arena. The shock of a military defeat in the 1948 war triggered a modernization process in the military, as well as development in economic policy in order to finance and to organize the army. National defense went up in the Syrian budget and the number of military forces increased from 25,000 in 1949 to 60,000 in 1963.³¹ External threats urged intensified military preparedness. Plans for building air-raid shelters, extending military education and strengthening border defenses were ardently carried out. In 1956, a nationwide draft of civilians, including women, was announced. This kind of nationalist modernization favored stability over broad democratic participation.

Defensive modernization encouraged a move towards the extreme centralization

of Syrian state power.³² Such a creation of the infrastructure for state intervention facilitated the introduction of authoritarianism. Sadowski,³³ Chaitani³⁴ and Seale³⁵ prove that calls for a more interventionist role for the state in Syria's economy were universal in Syrian society. Centralized, authoritative government was seen as the only force capable of generating capital, developing industry and protecting the borders. The strengthening of the state was initially supported by liberal elites, who maintained control of the institutions, and by entrepreneurs, whose actions would fail without state support. As Sadowski³⁶ points out expansion of the state's influence over the economy has been a prevailing trend in Syria since 1946. Just after independence the state, exercised little leverage on the economy through its control on tariffs (roads, schools and telecommunications), but within twenty years the state had developed into the single most powerful economic institution in the country. "In 1950, the state controlled about 8.3% of the national income, which more than tripled to 27.9% by 1965."³⁷

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As the 1948 crisis emerged, the Syrian government was neither able to guarantee external security, nor internal safety for the civilians. Strikes and acts of violence,

including the killing of 76 Damascene Jews, forced the civilian administration to announce a state of emergency and seek the army's help to maintain order. Ironically, as the population revolted, the politicized military became the vehicle for transmitting deep dissatisfaction, instead of repressing it. The army started presenting itself as the only body able to preserve nation's independence. Given the weakness of the post-independence civilian institutions, the army appeared as "the most organized, nationally-oriented social force with the largest stake in the state and the best equipped to impose order."³⁸ Troupes Spéciales and Sûreté Générale - military during the French mandate were the last directorates to be transferred from the French under Syrian control and they rose to a symbol of national unity and strength. This reinforced the link between the army and independence, emphasizing the role of the military as a guardian of sovereignty.³⁹

The Palestinian War brought hostility between the Government and the military, each blaming the other for the defeat. While officers complained about the poverty of provisions, and of defective and insufficient equipment, the Government accused the military of bribery and poor command. The cooking fat scandal, that charged Colonel Antoine Bustani, appointed by General Husni Al-Zaim, with profiteering at the army's expense, turned the army against the politicians, who were accused of meddling in the army's internal affairs

and not holding their own corrupted superiors accountable. The military, as well as the Syrian press, held Bey and Quwatli responsible for the lost war and demanded their resignation. Misgovernance and the humiliation of the defeat were used by colonel Al-Zaim as a moral justification for the coup. Al-Zaim, secretly backed by the US,⁴⁰ managed to convince the nationalist officers that a military rule could win the war. The word 'Palestine' became the slogan that brought the army to his side.⁴¹ On April 11, 1949, Al Zaim seized power, supported by urban masses dissatisfied with high prices and an inept bureaucracy. The press approved of the coup stating that, "there is no doubt that Syria will lose a little of its freedom, but nascent states' need for discipline is greater than the need for freedom."⁴²

Although brief, Al Zaim's rule was rich in consequences for Syria's democracy. The first putsch in the Middle East dismantled the traditional system and provided the model for future coups. Successive military dictators accomplished turning the army into a political instrument: Al Zaim reinforced and re-equipped his troops and brought the police and gendarmerie under their control. General Adib Shishakli built up the army's numbers and political role by promoting young, nationalist officers into political functions. His ambition was that Syria become "the 'Prussia of Arab states,' 'the fortress of steel' from which the spark of liberation would fly to the whole Arab world."⁴³ In 1954 Shishakli

was removed, but his political legacy of blurring the boundaries between military and civilian authorities remained. The army held all the cards - no government could introduce a policy that the army did not approve. The threat of military intervention was a factor sufficiently disruptive for the government to take heed of the army's opinion. The internal leverage of the military made it the most powerful single force in Syrian politics.⁴⁴

In spite of all this, however, the strength of Syria's army was quite relative. First, the military forces were not strong enough to defend Syria against her neighbors; second, they were too divided to maintain domestic power over a long period of time. The rapid changes in military rule from General Husni Al-Zaim to Colonel Sami Hinnawi to Colonel Fawzi Silu to Colonel Adib Shishakli and the early collapse of military power proved that the army could not rule on its own.⁴⁵

Even the radical parties that claimed freedom from all foreign influences came to terms with the necessity of defense treaties.

Norton classifies Syria's military as a peasant and minority-dominated military model, where control of the military becomes an existential imperative to minorities and socially unprivileged groups.⁴⁶ The army becomes a springboard for social ascent and thus encourages the lower

classes to join. But the disadvantage of this trend was that the army reflected society's fragmentation based on family, ethnicity and – increasingly – ideology, and produced constant, internal power struggles.⁴⁷

External Factors

Post-war competition for regional supremacy between Iraq and Egypt was intermingled in Syrian policy through foreign support for various political groups. As the 1948 war and the Syro-Egyptian union showed, Syria's internal politics were entangled with inter-Arab competition and the Great Powers struggle. A fight for domination in Syria was led not only by countries aspiring to the role of regional powers, but also by the Cold War rivals.

The intensity of regional conflicts and rivalries made Syria “prickly, defensive, ultra-nationalistic and intensely anti-French.”⁴⁸ Hostile to Israel, unfriendly towards Turkey, alienated from Lebanon and from Iraq, it felt isolated and vulnerable.⁴⁹ An effort to create a form of collective security failed, as the Middle East Defense Organization was considered to place Syria in the British sphere of influence.

Syria's perennial security problem created a dilemma in regard to external alignments. Even the radical parties that claimed freedom from all foreign influences came to terms with the necessity of defense treaties. In February

1958, the merger of Egypt and Syria into the United Arab Republic (UAR), with President Nasser as its head, was proclaimed at Cairo. The new UAR was principally of a defensive nature.

The UAR showed the weakness of the Syrian government, too divided to form a coherent policy. Conservatives, although not approving of the merger, did not object, because the union was seen as the only way to eliminate communist influence. The merger was regarded by the Ba'ath party as a way to increase its leverage, by exporting its main Arab solidarity policy. Even though all the Syrian party leaders claimed to be in favor of the Union it was the Ba'ath party that took serious steps to implement it.⁵⁰ The fragmentation of the political system gave the army officers the casting vote. The project of the union was seen positively by the officers as a way to establish their supremacy over the political parties.

For a strategic country like Syria, the neutrality proclaimed at the Bandung conference of 1955 became nearly impossible. The Cold War was not just about fulfilling geopolitical ambitions; it was a conflict of two paths to modernization: capitalist and socialist. Superpower rivalry negatively affected the process of economic and political modernization as the two camps tried to impose their own model of socio-economic and political development. According to Moubayed,⁵¹ the prerequisite of maintaining a democratic system was to accept a set of rules imposed by

the West - accepting Israel, being more responsive to American needs.

Syria's colonial past; the West's recognition of and financial, political, and military support for Israel; Secretary of State Dulles' refusal to finance the Aswan Dam; the Suez crisis and the subsequent war created a climate of distrust towards the West. The Syrians had "no wish to fight side by side with their executioners"⁵². The West, in demanding active Arab support for their side in the Cold War conflict, made a strategic error of framing the 'either with or against us' attitude. Syria's gradual rapprochement to the Soviets was not a result of shared ideology, but rather stemmed from public resentment towards the West. By ignoring the fierce anti-Communism of Nasser and the Ba'th party, the Americans overestimated the risk of Syria becoming a satellite of Moscow. Russian diplomacy skillfully used people's increasing hostility towards 'imperialist' treaties and presented itself as an alternative that offers help with no strings attached. In contrast to the West, it recognized Syria's strong sense of Arab nationalism. Since the overthrow of Shishakli in February 1954, both Egypt and the USSR aimed at influencing Syria. Both countries chose the right moment, when widespread apprehension of an external threat from Israel sparked demand for a powerful protector. A pro-Soviet propaganda campaign in the press, the Soviet Cultural Centre, trade, but most of all military protection, strengthened Syria's ties with the Soviet

bloc. This does not mean, however, that the informed public welcomed Russian engagement. A fall into communism was equally threatening to the conservatives as to the Ba'ths who competed with the SCP for influence over the electorate. They were concerned that an electoral victory or a Communist-led coup would provoke right-wing counter-measures and western backlash.

Liberal democracy was not a common denominator for the post-war period, never 'the only game in town'.

Nevertheless, in addition to its military benefits, cooperation with the Soviets seemed practical on purely economic grounds as well. It provided arms without restrictions and purchased Syria's surplus of agricultural produce. A turning point was the Czech arms deal – due to its military purchases, Syria found itself in opposition to the West, together with Nasser. As late as the autumn of 1957 President al-Quwatli was still declaring: "Had it not been for Israel, we would not have felt the need for new weapons; and were it not for the unrelenting preferential treatment of Israel by the United States, we would not have been introduced to new Russians."⁵³

Security and stability turned out to be more important than democracy. An Israeli attack on Arab villages north-east of Lake Tiberias in December 1955, and border clashes with Turkey during

the Baghdad pact crisis, confirmed the seriousness of the threat of foreign attack and accelerated Syria's rapprochement with the East. The Soviet Union voiced military support for the Syrian side and Syria, desperate for security, had no choice but to welcome its new, powerful allies. The alliance with Egypt and the USSR had two serious repercussions: Syria was shifting into Egypt's sphere of influence and joining the Cold War conflict.

The nation was not able to cope successfully with rapid social changes and was defenseless in the face of external threats.

Another event, illustrative of Syria's conflicted socio-political scene, was the 'Malki affair.' Adnan al-Malki, a charismatic officer and a supporter of Ba'ath Party was assassinated by a sergeant who belonged to the pro-Western Syrian Social National Party (SSNP). An official investigation identified the US as a major financier of the SSNP and accused US officials of complicity in Malki's murder. The consequences of the affair were far-reaching. It was used to get rid of right-wing rivals and to advance Ba'ath party popularity by gaining public sympathy. The media coverage of the murder strengthened the position of the left and of the army.⁵⁴ It also "gave the Syrian public an insight into the magnitude and the violence of the international contest in which Syria was a pawn and,

by injecting an element of hysteria into Syrian public life, encouraged her to run for safety to the arms of her new protectors".⁵⁵

Malki became a martyr for the values he stood for – Syrian independence, neutralism, militant Arabism and pro-Egyptian sentiments. The Malki affair sharpened the internal divisions of the army; following his death no officer could establish supremacy. "The unity of the army was destroyed as each political party and each neighboring state scrambled for military allies: secret subsidies flowed in from Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, as well as from Great Powers farther afield... thoroughly politicized, with its own budget and secret funds, the army became a jungle of intrigue, sometimes matching civilian factionalism, sometimes rent by its own indigenous rivalries."⁵⁶ During the turbulent period after Malki's murder, both the Parliament and the army were fragmented so it was difficult to establish who governed Syria. The competing factions feared each other more than any outside force⁵⁷ while the public found in Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser the leader they had been hoping for. The Suez crisis elevated him to a symbol of resistance to Western aggression and an ardent supporter of the Pan-Arab cause. Nasser gained mass popularity among Syrians through radio broadcasts, press releases, inflammatory speeches and nationalist songs.⁵⁸ Great public support of the idea of Arab unity and centering on the figure of a strong leader ignored the nature of Nasser's regime.⁵⁹

Conclusion

One of the most striking paradoxes in the analysis of the 1946 -1958 period is that Syrians, who fiercely fought to uphold their sovereignty, ultimately handed it voluntarily to Egypt. It shows the unprecedented scale of the pressures faced by the young democracy. The Syrian political scene was an interaction of complex social, military and foreign forces. Corruption and external pressures undermined the values of Syria's parliamentary system, and propaganda drove the public "to near hysteria by plots, coups d'état, and threats of invasion. These were not ideal conditions for the flowering of civic virtues or the proper functioning of elective democratic institutions."⁶⁰

Liberal democracy was not a common denominator for the post-war period, never 'the only game in town.' Indeed, Syrian society was deeply divided in regard to their identity and the shape the country should take. Neither independence nor liberal democracy offered a clear-cut solution to the problems that persisted in post-war Syria. These nascent institutions did not deal with the problems of distribution of wealth, the identity crisis, or foreign military and economic competition. The nation was not able to cope successfully with rapid social changes and was defenseless in the face of external threats.

The weakness of Syria's leaders and their corruption contributed to the collapse of Syria's regime.⁶¹ The

Damascene government had little experience and lacked sufficient funds to implement the necessary reforms of state services. It was too weak to ensure the survival of liberal institutions. Divided parties could not keep the army subordinate to civilian administration, nor provide efficient bureaucracy and accountability.⁶²

After 1948, the potential threats against the integrity and sovereignty of the Syrian state became reality and Syria's modernization took on a defensive character.

The basic task assigned to the Syrian state was creating a 'rich nation, strong army' in order to meet the national security challenge posed by foreign threat. After the disastrous defeat by Israel, radical changes were made in order to speed recovery from the humiliation and to prevent its repetition by organizing a political system that would support development most efficiently.⁶³ There was a general consensus regarding the need to strengthen the state, and stability was more important than democracy. After 1948, the potential threats against the integrity and sovereignty of the Syrian state became reality and Syria's modernization took on a defensive character. Military coups and defensive modernization came as a reaction against the foreign threat coming from various

sources - Israel, Turkey, the Hashemites, and the Cold War powers. The push towards advancing Syria's economic and military power was supported by the public as a way of introducing stability.

Overwhelming military influence was another reason for Syria's democratic breakdown. Because the army appeared to be the only force strong enough to protect Syria's sovereignty, loyalty shifted from the civilian government to the military. As the population revolted, instead of upholding the existing system of authority, a radicalized military became the vehicle for transmitting the population's deep dissatisfaction with the system. This paradox was defined by Peter Feaver: "The very institution created to protect the polity [i.e. the military] is given sufficient power to become a threat to the polity."⁶⁴

The central questions tackled in the paper are specific to the Syrian case but they simultaneously open a topic of a more general nature: why do policy

failures lead to governmental change in some democracies, but result in the very breakdown of democracy in others? The theory of democratic breakdowns is one of the subjects that could benefit from further research. This in-depth single-country analysis can serve as a starting point for a comparative study of the breakdown of liberal parliamentary systems. In the light of a new wave of democratization, it is pertinent to find the answer to Juan J. Linz's⁶⁵ question about the existence of a common pattern in the changes of regime processes. The paper sheds light on the possible obstacles to democratic consolidation. Highlighting the experience of democratic institutions between 1949 and 1958 is significant for modern civil society reformers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It can contribute to a better understanding of causes and processes that can lead democracies to collapse and to their replacement by highly illiberal regimes.

Endnotes

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