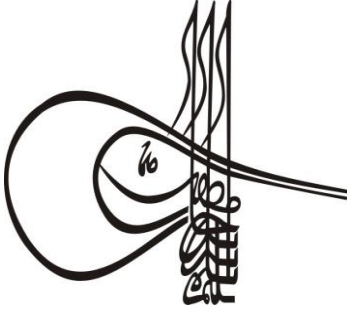




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THE UNENDING ARAB SPRING IN SYRIA: THE PRIMARY DYNAMICS OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AS EXPERIENCED BY SYRIAN REFUGEES*

*İnci AKSU KARGIN***

ABSTRACT

In March 2011, in the Syrian town of Daraa, children whose ages ranged from nine to fifteen wrote anti-regime graffiti on a wall, which prompted the regime's security forces to arrest and torture the children. Soon after, Syrian citizens poured into streets to protest against the regime's arbitrary acts, and the regime responded this by shooting the peaceful protestors; this served to light the fire that would result in the Syrian civil war. However, although the events that took place in Daraa served to ignite Syria's civil war, there were, in fact, a great many other problems that had effectively led the country toward war. In order to understand the key factors behind the war, this study conducted interviews with 60 Syrian refugees in the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep and Hatay. These refugees were witness to what pre-war Syria experienced. In the semi-structured interviews conducted, the interviewees assessed the socioeconomic environment in Syria that contributed to the outbreak of the civil war. Among the economic problems that helped to usher in war in Syria were the high rate of unemployment and unequal distribution of welfare. In addition, the neo-liberal and privatization policies implemented under Bashar al-Assad served to create a new bourgeoisie class and further impoverish the majority due to a decrease in subsidies and other benefits. Further, the agricultural sector, which played an important role in Syria's economy, suffered a 4-year drought, which was made worse by the fact that the regime failed to take the necessary precautions that would have allowed the country to weather a problem of this nature and magnitude. This meant that, among other things, many Syrian citizens working in agriculture and husbandry experienced serious financial losses. As a result, two to three million people emigrated from the countryside to Syria's urban regions, and these migrations increased the cities' rates of

* This study has been produced out of the author's doctoral dissertation data.

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unemployment. Moreover, real estate prices, which increased due to the arrival of Iraqi refugees to Syria during the 2003 Iraq War, and food prices, which had also increased in recent years, also played a role in the outbreak of war in Syria. Economics, however, were not the only factors that led Syria into war; there were social factors at work as well. Syria's civil war may have seemed inevitable, given the excessive control, pressure, and violence to which the Syrian regime subjected the country's citizens. Security forces and Mukhabarat (intelligence) made life increasingly difficult for the people of Syria, and there seemed no end to this, as opposition to the controlling regime had not been permitted since the Hafez al-Assad period. Further, although the interviewees suggested that there were no major pre-war problems among Syria's various sectarian groups, the Bashar regime played on old fears in order to secure the support of Alawites against the Sunni-dominated opposition. The regime also set the Shabbihas, which are comprised primarily of Alawites, against the opposition groups and their brutal acts added a sectarian dimension to the Syrian civil war.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Shortly after the Arab Spring began, on January 31st, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal. In his interview, he criticized the Tunisian and Egyptian governments for ignoring their citizens' demands for reform demands. Further, he referred to Syria as a stable country and stated emphatically that there was no chance that Syria would implode as Tunisia and Egypt had (Karabat, 2013). While Assad was delivering his message to the world, however, the pieces were already in place that would eventually cause Syria to erupt in war.

When one takes a step back and looks at the full picture, the numerous factors that contributed to the Syrian civil war come into focus. Assad's neo-liberal and privatization policies, high unemployment rates, income inequality, increasing poverty, and damage done to the agricultural sector via drought and poor planning are among the socioeconomic factors that led to the war. And the socioeconomic fires that began to ignite were fanned by the control the regime's security forces and intelligence wielded over the country's citizens, the government's implementation of arbitrary policies, and the ways in which the regime intimidated opposition. These factors all worked together to create an environment primed for infighting.

Methods

In this study, the specific problems that led to Syria's civil war will be discussed in detail in light of Syrian refugees own narratives. This academic study is important in that it gives voice to the Syrian refugees who witnessed the events of pre-war Syria; it is because of these refugees that this study was possible and that this author is able to elaborate on the pre-war Syrian context. In order to better understand their experiences and hear their stories, this study made use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with a total of 60 Syrian refugees in Hatay and Gaziantep, the Turkish provinces where the

majority of Syrian refugees migrated due to geographical and cultural proximity.

The research was conducted with participants who were over 18 years of age. The content of the research was explained to the interviewees, and interviews were conducted with those who gave oral consent. The interviews took approximately an hour or two to complete, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were conducted in public places (e.g., coffee houses, parks, gardens, streets) and in interviewees' houses. In addition, since the majority of Syrian interviewees did not want to endanger their status in Turkey, and because most of them were afraid to talk with a stranger, this research employed the *snowball technique* so as to secure more study participants. To find additional participants, the researcher asked the Syrian interviewees if they had any referrals; the only caveat was that the interviewees were not allowed to refer their own family members. These referrals were in turn asked for further referrals, as the researcher continued to utilize the snowball sampling technique. For purposes of security, the interviewees' real names have been concealed and pseudonyms have been used instead. Finally, all of the data collected from the interviewees during the fieldwork was uploaded to the Dedoose qualitative data analysis program and was analyzed using main and sub-codes.

The Economic Reasons behind the Syrian Civil War

There is no doubt that the country's ongoing economic problems served to precipitate Syria's civil war. One of the economic problems pre-war Syria faced was high unemployment. Before the war, 79% Syrians were below the age of 34, and the majority of those individuals were had graduated from a university (Şen, 2013). According to Professor Gelvin, on average, newly graduated university students spent at least four years searching for work. With the new economic policies in place, the public sector was no longer providing employment to the Syrian citizens, which meant these individuals had to turn to the private sector in hopes of finding work (Hinnebusch, 2012); this only served to worsen the unemployment problem in Syria. During Syria's pre-war period, the unemployment rate was around 30%'s (Karabat, 2013), but the regime doctored the unemployment numbers so as to suggest that the unemployment rate was actually lower (Raphaeli, 2007). In order for the government to reduce unemployment, it would have had to absorb at least 300,000 individuals annually into the labor market; this could have been achieved through annual growth rates of between 7% and 8% (Raphaeli, 2007). Under the new economic policies, the regime abandoned its role as a job provider, which forced citizens to find jobs with the help of acquaintances or by paying bribes to those who might help them.

Syria's unemployment rate was also worsened by pre-war droughts, which undermined the household income of citizens whose living depended on agriculture, and which caused people to move from the countryside to urban areas. The agricultural sector, which had always occupied a significant place in the Syrian economy, was negatively affected as a result of the regime not taking necessary precautions that would have lessened the impact of a severe 4-year drought; this lack of

planning led to serious economic losses among citizens who made their livings from land (Saleeby, 2012).

Additional economic problems, such as increasing real estate and food prices, also contributed to war in Syria. James Gelvin stated that in the pre-Arab Spring period, food prices had reached high levels, and because the government was no longer providing subsidies to the poor and low-income factions of society, the average family in Syria was obliged to spend at least 35% of its income on food. Bassam Haddad noted the importance of subsidies for Syria's poor citizens. He stated that while the citizens in this low-income group were able to cover their basic needs, such as wheat, oil, and sugar, via subsidies, they were pushed further into poverty once the subsidies ceased (Haddad, 2012).

The Social Reasons behind Syria's Civil War

After seizing state power, Hafez al-Assad's first priority was achieving loyalty. Father Assad, who took lessons from the political past, eliminate threats to his regime by placing Alawites in the high administrative and military cadres. These individuals came primarily from his clan, so he could count on their loyalty. Further, in order to create "malleable citizens" who would comply with rule, Hafez al-Assad assumed authority over the people by means of military, intelligence (al-Mukhabarat), and security services (Martin, 2015). The majority of interviewees stated that they feared the Mukhabarat quite a lot, so they did not talk about politics either in public places or in their own homes, as they believed that even their private walls had ears in Syria.

According to a number of interviewees, after the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion was quelled through blood in Hama during the Hafez al-Assad period, the Sunni citizens who were thought to have any connection to the Muslim Brotherhood movement were deprived of some rights and were kept from being hired to fill positions in government offices. When the Muslim Brotherhood's assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad on June 26th, 1980, failed, Hafez al-Assad began to assume a more offensive attitude against the Muslim Brotherhood (Mercan, 2012). The day following the assassination attempt, Hafez al-Assad issued an order that prompted the massacre of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members in the Tedmour prison; the massacre was carried out by Assad's brother Refaat al-Assad (Lund, 2011). After this incident, Law no:49 was enacted on July 7th, 1980; it was stated that the penalty for being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood would be capital punishment. However, this did not settle the conflict between the parties, and when it reached its climax in February 1982, Hafez al-Assad gave his brother Refaat al-Assad the order to organize military operations and head to Hama, which was considered the center of the movement; the objective was to quell the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Mercan, 2012). As a result of this incident, which became known as the "Hama massacre," approximately 10,000 to 30,000 Muslim Brotherhood members were killed, and more than 100,000 people were internally displaced (Ataman, 2012). What was experienced in Hama not only enabled father Assad to annihilate the most powerful internal threat to his regime, but it also made clear to the Syrian people that he was not above slaughtering his own people if it meant the survival of his regime.

When Bashar al-Assad first came to power in Syria in 2000, he pledged that government would employ democratic strategies and that the economy, education, and administration of the state would be modernized according to the needs of the time (Hinnebusch, 2009). Throughout this period, which was called the Damascus Spring, primarily academic and intellectual segments of society, which benefited from the relatively free political environment the regime granted, had formed forums so as to determine and outline favorable conditions in order to convince the regime to carry out reform (Lundgren-Jörum, 2012).

In October 2005, the opposition groups in Syria published a manifesto called the “Damascus Declaration.” This was an important document since it was signed by both Arab and Kurdish parties, including those who were banned by the regime (Wikas, 2007). In May 2006, 250 members of the opposition groups signed the “Beirut-Damascus Declaration,” which not only called upon the government to initiate reform, but also criticized the government’s policies regarding Lebanon (Wikas, 2007). Not long after, the regime decided that these declarations served American and Israel conspiracies regarding Syria. As a result, 12 people who had signed the Damascus Declaration were arrested and were sentenced to between 3 and 6 years imprisonment (Ulutaş, 2011). In sum, Bashar al-Assad pledged reform when he first seized power in Syria, but he took no apparent steps to upend the extant policies and procedures, which suggested to the people that he was no different than his father (Salik, 2011).

Finally, although the interviewees stated that there was no major conflict between different sectarian factions during the pre-war period, the crisis in Syria and eventually the war gradually began to gain a sectarian dimension as well. One of the main causes of this was that Bashar al-Assad manipulated the Alawites by playing on their historical fears, and he did this in order to keep the Alawites on his side as the war broke out (Phillips, 2015). Except for a minority segment, the majority of the Alawites in Syria were unable to realize much benefit from Bashar al-Assad’s economic policies (Goldsmith, 2012). Further, subsequent to the outbreak of the war, the Bashar regime utilized the *Shabbiha* units, which consist predominantly of Alawites, and he did this in order to repress the Sunni opposition.

Finally, it is important to note here the effect that non-state actors had with regard to the sectarian dimension of the Syrian war. Since 2011, the year during which protests broke out in Syria, Lebanon Hezbollah, Iran, and Iraq’s Shia Islamist militants provided both political and military support to the Bashar regime (Smyth, 2015). While the regime continued to garner Shia support, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey lent their support to the opposition, and this also served to shape the sectarian aspect to the crisis (Hawari, 2016). Because the aforementioned countries’ involvement in the Syrian crisis was prompted by their interest in protecting their regional benefits and security rather than by sectarian feelings (Berti & Paris, 2014), and because the United States and Russia became involved in the crisis in terms of diplomacy and military, Syria’s war is not only a regime versus anti-regime civil war; rather, it also serves as a proxy war for regional and global interests.

Conclusion

What occurred in Daraa was only one of the human rights violations that became commonplace during the pre-war period in Syria, but it was enough to prompt the country to implode, as the people had grown weary after weathering so many socioeconomic problems for so long. A high unemployment rate that affected primarily high-school educated youth, income inequality, and increasing poverty among the majority of the population were some of the basic economic problems in Syria in the period prior to the outbreak of war. Additional economic factors behind the start of the war include Bashar al-Assad's neo-liberal economic policies, which served very few while pushing the majority into poverty; the fall of the once-important agricultural sector due to government neglect and poorly planning with regard to severe drought; the migration of people from the countryside to the cities when they could no longer depend on the agricultural sector to sustain them; and increased real estate prices resulting from increased demands for housing due to the presence of Iraqi refugees who fled the war in 2003. All of these factors, along with increased food prices and reduced subsidies, served to negatively affect poor and low-income citizens' purchasing power and quality of life, which primed the country for a civil war.

In addition to the economic reasons, the regime's use of fear and repression to control the people, and its lack of tolerance of any opposition, served as the social factors that contributed to the war. Since the period of Hafez al-Assad, Assad's ability to oppress the most effective opposition movement of the time via violence left a deep imprint in the memory of the Syrian people, and this prevented the formation of an effective opposition movement against the regime. Unlike his father, when Bashar al-Assad first came to power in Syria, he promised that he would implement economic and political reform; however, after a few nominally democratic acts, he, like his father, chose to rule via repression and intimidation in hopes of protecting his regime. In addition, and as the Syrian refugees noted, although there were no major problems between the Sunnis and Alawites in daily life in pre-war Syria, when the regime was unable to stop the protestors with reform initiatives, it tapped into the Alawites' historical fears in order to secure their support against the Sunni protestors. The government also benefited from paramilitary forces such as Shabbiha, as these forces suppressed the opposition. These factors added a sectarian dimension to the war. Further, to protect their regional benefits and security, Iran, Lebanon Hezbollah, and Iraqi Islamist Shia militants backed the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey sided with the opposition; this further helped to shape the sectarian dimension of the Syrian civil war.

Presently, in Syria, where the war is approaching its seventh year, conflict and human rights violations continue and will gradually worsen if the sources of the conflict are not addressed. An end to violence is essentially conditional on international actors setting aside their particular self-interests in order to take concrete steps aimed at ending the Syrian war. Today, the existence of externally supported groups, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, is not only an overt threat to Syria's territorial integrity, but it also poses a security threat to the world's countries. If the Syrian crisis is not adequately addressed in the long

term, it might result in additional problems having to do with the security of regional powers, increased risk of ethno-sectarian conflicts, violent acts carried out by terror organizations in the region, and additional human rights violations and civilian deaths. Further, this could result in new refugee flows, which are not without their own problems. At this juncture, it is conditional on other countries taking concrete steps to demilitarize Syria in order to wrest control from terrorist groups and restore the country's stability. Restoring order to Syria and rebuilding the country will be a great feat, and before anything else can be done, countries must cease supporting both domestic and foreign fighters in Syria regardless of their alliance to the al-Assad regime; this is the only way to ensure that conditions will allow Syrian to recover. By facilitating a peaceful environment in Syria, outside agents will assist in bringing order to the region, which will pave the way for millions of Syrian citizens to return to their homes. This will also in turn lessen the burdens experienced by Syrian refugees' host countries, as they will be in the position to reallocate their resources and more efficiently address the needs of their citizens.

Keywords: Syrian civil war, Bashar al-Assad period, socioeconomic problems, Syrian refugees

SURİYE'DE BİTMEK BİLMİYEN ARAP BAHARI: SURİYELİ MÜLTECİLERİN DENEYİMLERİNE GÖRE SURİYE İÇ SAVAŞI'NIN TEMEL DİNAMİKLERİ

ÖZET

Mart 2011'de, Suriye'nin Dera kentinde, yaşları 9 ila 15 arasında değişen çocukların duvara rejim karşıtı yazı yazmaları üzerine, rejimin güvenlik güçleri harekete geçerek çocukları gözaltına aldı ve işkenceler yaptı. Çok geçmeden, Suriyeli vatandaşların rejimin keyfi uygulamalarını protesto etmek amacıyla sokaklara dökülmesi ve rejimin de barışçıl göstericilere ateş ederek karşılık vermesi Suriye iç savaşı ile sonuçlanacak olayların fitilini ateşledi. Ancak, her ne kadar Dera'da gerçekleşen bu olayların Suriye iç savaşını tetiklediği düşünülse de esasında ülkeyi fiilen iç savaşa sürükleyecek birçok problem vardı. Bu çalışma kapsamında, savaşın çıkmasına sebep olan temel faktörlerin anlaşılabilmesi için Suriye'de savaş öncesi dönemin gerçek tanıkları olan ve şu anda Gaziantep ve Hatay illerinde yaşayan 60 Suriyeli mülteci ile mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiştir. Yürütülen yarı-yapılandırılmış mülakatlarda, görüşmeciler Suriye'de iç savaşın patlak vermesinde rol oynayan sosyo-ekonomik ortamı değerlendirmişlerdir. Suriye'yi iç savaşa götüren ekonomik nedenlerden başlıcaları yüksek işsizlik oranları ve eşit olmayan refah dağılımıdır. Buna ilave olarak, Beşar Esad döneminde uygulanan neo-liberal politikalar ve özelleştirme politikaları ülkede yeni bir burjuva sınıfı yaratılmasına hizmet ederken sübvansiyon ve diğer devlet yardımlarını keserek halkın büyük bir kısmını daha da fakirliğe itmiştir. İlaveten, Suriye ekonomisinde önemli rol oynayan tarım sektörünün 4 yıllık kuraklıktan olumsuz etkilenmesi ve rejimin de buna ilişkin gerekli tedbirleri almamış olması ülkenin bu mahiyette ve büyüklükte bir sorunu ortadan kaldırmasını zorlaştırmıştır. Tarım ve

hayvancılıkla uğraşan birçok Suriye vatandaşı maddi anlamda ciddi kayba uğramıştır. Sonucunda ise 2 ila 3 milyon kişi kırsal bölgelerden Suriye'nin kentsel alanlarına göç etmiş ve bu göçler beraberinde şehirlerdeki işsizlik oranlarını da arttırmıştır. Ayrıca, 2003 Irak Savaşı esnasında Iraklı mültecilerin Suriye'ye gelmesiyle artan gayrimenkul fiyatları ve son yıllarda artan gıda fiyatları, yine Suriye'de iç savaşın patlak vermesinde rol oynayan faktörlerdendir. Ancak Suriye'yi savaşa sürükleyen nedenler sadece ekonomiden kaynaklı nedenler değildir. En az ekonomik faktörler kadar sosyal faktörler de Suriye'de ortaya çıkan savaşın tetikçisi olmuştur. Suriye rejiminin ülke vatandaşları üzerinde kurmuş olduğu aşırı kontrol, baskı ve şiddet mekanizması Suriye iç savaşını kaçınılmaz hale getirmiştir. Güvenlik güçleri ve istihbarat servisi Suriye'deki vatandaşlara hayatı çekilmez hale getirmiştir. Hafız Esad döneminden itibaren hiçbir zaman ülkede rejim karşıtı muhalif oluşumlara izin verilmemiştir. Bunlara ilaveten, her ne kadar görüşmeciler savaş öncesi dönemde Suriye'de farklı mezhepsel gruplar arasında büyük bir sorunun söz konusu olmadığını belirtse de Beşar rejiminin Sünni ağırlıklı muhalefete karşı Alevilerin desteğini almak amacıyla temelde Alevilerden oluşan Şebbiha birliklerini kullanması ve bu birliklerin gerçekleştirdiği acımasız eylemler Suriye iç savaşına mezhepsel bir boyut da kazandırmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye iç savaşı, Beşar Esad dönemi, sosyoekonomik problemler, Suriyeli mülteciler

Introduction

The act of migrating is a phenomenon as old as humans themselves. There are numerous reasons why individuals migrate from their home regions to other regions; some migrate as a result of war, exile, natural disaster, political pressures, or environmental changes, while others migrate so as to enjoy better living conditions. If one's act of translocation is not the result of his or her own will or consent, then it is referred to as forced migration; if migration occurs, however, because an individual willfully seeks to secure higher living standards, then it is referred to as voluntary migration (Yılmaz, 2014). In the migration literature, individuals who migrate for reasons that are compulsory in nature are defined as refugees and asylum seekers, while those who move from one place to another of their own accord are identified as immigrants.

Regardless of what prompts the acts of translocation, however, migration movements affect both the source countries and the host countries with regard to their socioeconomics and cultures (Cengiz, 2015). As such, migration is a phenomenon that needs to be further examined so that we may better understand all of the ways it can affect source and host countries as well as the individuals who are a part of the migration movements.

Castles, DeHass, and Miller (2013), as if they are referring to Syria's present-day humanitarian crisis, suggest that the age of migration is permanent since ethnic and political conflicts will continue to emerge throughout the world as a result of globalization. These conflicts will, of course, prompt mass migration, and it is inevitable that both source countries and host countries will be affected by the migration movements.

A profound chain of events was set in motion when a vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia in December 2010. Bouazizi sought to draw attention to the socioeconomic problems and arbitrary acts of his country, but his radical act resulted in something much larger, as it prompted people in countries such as Egypt and Yemen to act as well, and this in turn brought

about the end of these countries' repressive and corrupted regimes. This period of social and political transmutation in the Middle East, which came to be known as Arab Spring, had reached Syria as of March 2011. The people of Syria expected that the Bashar al-Assad regime would fall just as the aforementioned countries' regimes fell. However, the majority of Syria's security forces remained loyal to the regime and responded to the peaceful protestors with violence, which culminated in intensified and country-wide protests. Ultimately, opposition groups were armed and external actors got involved, and Syria entered into a civil war.

On March 15th, 2011, in Daraa, which is a rural province of Syria, several schoolchildren between the ages of nine and fifteen wrote "down with the regime" on the walls along the streets; this led security forces to detain and torture the children (Lesch, 2012). When intelligence officers refused to respond favorably to families demands when they went to get their children, hundreds of citizens, including the families of the childred, gathered in the Omari mosque in Daraa and protested the regime (Lesch, 2012). On the eve of these events, the protestors were not demanding a regime change; rather, they were demanding that the children be returned to their families and that long-promised reforms be implemented. In order to assume control of the situation, and to prevent it from worsening, Bashar al-Assad did implement some reforms he believed might satisfy the protestors. The reforms he and his regime implemented are as follows. On April 1st of that year, public sector officers' wages were increased; on April 4th, the governor of Daraa, who was held responsible for the events that transpired in Daraa, was deposed; on April 6th, citizenship rights were promised to 250,000 Kurds whose citizenship was stripped from them during the Bath Party period; on April 14th, the regime declared that it would release those who were arrested during the protests; and on April 19th, martial law that had been in force since 1963 was lifted (Lesch, 2012).

However, opponents of the regime did not find the reforms satisfactory, as they understood that these were efforts meant only to placate them and silence their rising voices. In our interview, the former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Vice President Hussam al-Ghadban stated that the reforms should have been tied to the time to which they corresponded. For Ghadban, by the time Bashar al-Assad presented his reforms, it was too late since the people were no longer talking about or specifically interest in reform. By the time the reforms were offered, people's demands for change had turned into bloodshed and killing in the streets; the government's offer of reform, at this point, would not stop the revolution.

When the reforms, which were expected to quiet the protestors, failed to do as expected, Bashar al-Assad claimed that what was happening in Syria was not the result of any socioeconomic or political problems (Lesch, 2012); rather, he claimed that foreign powers were responsible for suggesting conspiracies and orchestrating Syria's growing turmoil (Bhardwaj, 2012). As such, the regime claimed that anyone in Syria who stood in opposition to the country's government was a traitor propped up by outside powers; this paved the way for violent acts to be carried out against the protestors.

As a result of the events that began in Syria in March 2011, hundreds of thousands of civilians lost their lives, and millions of Syrian citizens were internally displaced (IDPs) and had to seek asylum from neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Today, Turkey hosts approximately 3.5 million of Syria's 5.5 million refugees within its borders (UNHCR, 2018), making it home to the world's largest refugee population.

Shortly after the Arab Spring began, on January 31st, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal. In his interview, he criticized the Tunisian and Egyptian governments for ignoring their citizens' demands for reform demands. Further, he referred to Syria as a stable country and stated emphatically that there was no chance that Syria would implode as Tunisia and Egypt had (Karabat, 2013). While Assad was delivering his message to the world, however, the pieces were already in place that would eventually cause Syria to erupt in war.

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The research was conducted with participants who were over 18 years of age. The content of the research was explained to the interviewees, and interviews were conducted with those who gave oral consent. The interviews took approximately an hour or two to complete, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were conducted in public places (e.g., coffee houses, parks, gardens, streets) and in interviewees' houses. In addition, since the majority of Syrian interviewees did not want to endanger their status in Turkey, and because most of them were afraid to talk with a stranger, this research employed the *snowball technique* so as to secure more study participants. To find additional participants, the researcher asked the Syrian interviewees if they had any referrals; the only caveat was that the interviewees were not allowed to refer their own family members. These referrals were in turn asked for further referrals, as the researcher continued to utilize the snowball sampling technique. For purposes of security, the interviewees' real names have been concealed and pseudonyms have been used instead. Finally, all of the data collected from the interviewees during the fieldwork was uploaded to the Dedoose qualitative data analysis program and was analyzed using main and sub-codes.

The Economic Reasons behind the Syrian Civil War

There is no doubt that the country's ongoing economic problems served to precipitate Syria's civil war. Since he came to power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad began taking steps to shift the country from a statist economic understanding to a free-market economy (Abboud & Arslanian, 2008). Along with this economic understanding, which galvanizes liberalization, privatization, and foreign investment, Bashar al-Assad believed that the dynamism that the Syrian economy needed, because it had been stagnant for a while, could be created. To implement this economic program, Assad looked to the Chinese economic model (Abboud & Arslanian, 2008). According to this model, the regime was seeking both to develop and modernize the country via economic reforms and to assume control of the masses (Lust-Okar, 2006). In other words, this model, which highlights economic liberalization, does not allow for similar political liberalization (Abboud & Arslanian, 2008). So that the model could be implemented, Bashar al-Assad enacted several laws. For instance, private banks were permitted to operate in Syria, public goods were privatized, and the ban on carrying foreign currency was lifted (Sandıklı & Çakmak, 2014). However, these steps, which were taken to revive the Syrian economy, not only created the economic boost that was expected, but they also brought about numerous problems. In an interview I conducted with James Gelvin, a professor of Middle Eastern history at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Professor Gelvin noted the impact that this economic policy had on Syrian society; he stated:

All regimes in the Middle East are [isomorphic]. I do not care whether they are kingdoms or Republics. They are all isomorphic; they are all the same. And there were four factors that made the regimes vulnerable. That means uprisings will take place. The first one was that the government violated the rule of compliance. From the inception of the states of the period of decolonization to let's say the 1970s, there was a bargain that the governments made with their populations – a promise they made – which had to do with the 'benefits of compliance'. In other words, sit down and shut up, and we will take care of you. But beginning in the 1970s, with the introduction of the neoliberal economics worldwide, governments began to back away from the promises that they made. What it means, of course, is that populations themselves, you know, who are used to things like free education, free medical care, subsidized food, fuel, all these things – these populations were now not getting what they were supposed to be getting, and they were not getting, for example, the sort of jobs that they used to have with privatization taking place... And Syria was at the forefront of many of these problems.

As Professor Gelvin stated, the neo-liberalization and privatization policies that Bashar al-Assad pursued prompted cuts to aid (namely, subsidies) that previous governments made available to the majority of the people, and this brought about resentment on the part of those who had previously benefited from this aid. In 1958, when Syria formed the United Arab Republic (UAR) by uniting with Egypt, land reform and nationalization policies were implemented in Syria in order to break up the power of traditional aristocrats (Özkoç, 2008). However, in Syria's seperative period (1961-1963), which brought about the end of the UAR via a coup carried out by a group of elites and military officers, all the statist policies that had been implemented during the UAR period were reversed (Özkoç, 2008). The banks and industrial businesses were privatized, and the land was redistributed to the large land owners (Özkoç, 2008). However, when the Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria via military coup on March 8th, 1963, all of the economic policies that had been implemented during the separatist period were lifted and a statist economic program was put back into place (Özkoç, 2008). This economic policy, which Raymond Hinnebusch refers to as the "revolution from above," was based on land reform and nationalization and had not only broken up the power of the bourgeoisie but also ameliorated the living conditions of those who worked the land, thus ensuring their loyalty to the regime (Hinnebusch, 1995). When Hafez al-Assad seized power in Syria in 1970, he maintained this economic understanding until 1980s, as the increasing oil rents charged during this decade (i.e., the foreign aid provided by the Gulf countries) contributed greatly to the Syrian economy's ability to keep up (Arslanian, 2008; Özkoç, 2008). Thus, it also allowed the government to provide for the needy segments of society, thereby ensuring that their satisfaction with the regime was sustained.

However, since the majority of the investments and expenditures in the public sphere depended on aid from the Gulf countries and oil exports rather than in-state production and domestic resources, the Syrian economy assumed a fragile position with regard to the conjunctural changes (Hinnebusch, 1995). Moreover, since the majority of state revenues were used for public expenditures, such as subsidies and jobs (Hinnebusch, 2012), the Syrian economy could not accumulate capital domestically, which meant that the desired reforms could not be put into practice (Hinnebusch, 1995). Beginning in the mid 1980s, Syria's economic revenues began to decline dramatically. Syria's siding with Iran during the Iraq-Iran War disturbed the Gulf countries and caused them to reduce the aid they gave to Syria (Özkoç, 2008). Syria faced further economic decline with the collapse of Soviet Union, which meant that it would be deprived of a key source of foreign aid (Özkoç, 2008). This, along with the country's reduced oil exports, meant that Syria was in a precarious position economically (Arslanian, 2008). As such, in order to make up for the reduction in state revenues and foreign aid, Hafez al-Assad sought to galvanize private capital and minimize the public sector's role in the economy (Goulden, 2011) by lifting barriers that prevented or made difficult privatization (Özkoç, 2008). Therefore, the neo-liberal economic policies that Bashar al-Assad put into practice were essentially just means of continuing the policies implemented by his

father (Hinnebusch, 1995). When Bashar al-Assad took over the management of the country in 2000, the Syrian economy was already in a bad place (Arslanian, 2008).

As noted previously, under Bashar's neo-liberal economic program, the operation of private banks in Syria was permitted, public goods were privatized, and the ban on carrying foreign currency was lifted (Sandıklı & Çakmak, 2014). However, the one salient point regarding the reform program he proposed was that rather than promote industry-based development, it sought to economically develop the banking, service, and tourism sectors (Şen, 2013). For example, \$20 billion was spent to construct luxury houses and hotels (Hinnebusch, 2012). According to Haddad (2011), in the first two months of 2010, 28 tourism projects were implemented, and at the same time, 48 textile factories were shut down.

Additionally, Bashar al-Assad's neo-liberal economic policies created a new capitalist class in the country, the crony class. The minority crony class took the lion's share from the economy by earning high incomes and being exempted from taxation, and the country's low-income citizens were forced to make up for the decreased tax revenue (Hinnebusch, 2012). Further, while the protections on imports were decreasing in a way that would protect the benefits of this crony class, small-scale businesses in the manufacturing sector were taking a hit economically (Karabat, 2013). Again, while the regime was building private schools, universities, and hospitals to serve the needs of this new capitalist class, the upkeep of the public education and health services, from which the majority of citizens benefited, was now left to the private sector (Hinnebusch, 2012). In sum, Bashar al-Assad's neo-liberal and privatization economic policies canceled the *loyalty for bread contract* that the previous governments signed with the majority of citizens, and the creation of a new capitalist class that was able to lean on the regime caused the extant wealth gap to widen between Syria's social classes.

Another economic factor that contributed to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war was the country's increasing unemployment, especially among the youth. A Syrian interviewee, Mahmut, had the following to say regarding this problem:

The reason for the war is that there was oppression. There was corruption in the regime. Syrians didn't have their rights. There was a lot of oppression. The government was an oppressor over Syrians. There was nothing good. There was also unemployment. Almost three quarters of Syrians were unemployed. Even when the government set up an employment office, they used people by taking money from them to help them find employment. The government took bribes from people. They worked as swindlers who took money from people without offering them jobs. Only a few people, such as merchants, are rich, and the rest are poor. Roughly 80% or 90% of Syrians are live under the poverty line. Only 10% are rich, and the rest of the people are poor. May Allah help them.

As Mahmut pointed out, one of the economic problems pre-war Syria faced was high unemployment. Before the war, 79% Syrians were below the age of 34, and the majority of those individuals were had graduated from a university (Şen, 2013). According to Professor Gelvin, on average, newly graduated university students spent at least four years searching for work. With the new economic policies in place, the public sector was no longer providing employment to the Syrian citizens, which meant these individuals had to turn to the private sector in hopes of finding work (Hinnebusch, 2012); this only served to worsen the unemployment problem in Syria. During Syria's pre-war period, the unemployment rate was around 30%'s (Karabat, 2013), but the regime doctored the unemployment numbers so as to suggest that the unemployment rate was actually lower (Raphaeli, 2007). In order for the government to reduce unemployment, it would have had to absorb at least 300,000 individuals annually into the labor market; this could have been achieved through annual growth rates of between 7% and 8% (Raphaeli, 2007). However, economic growth of this magnitude could not be achieved quickly since it would have required investments in Syria to

increase from around 17% to 35%, which would have necessitated increased foreign investment (Raphaeli, 2007). Syria had become isolated from the region both politically and economically, however, blocking any investments that might have come from the rich Gulf countries. Further, the country's public institutions that were responsible for helping citizens to find jobs were either not working properly or not effective in guiding the unemployed such that they could secure work (Raphaeli, 2007). Thus, under the new economic policies, the regime abandoned its role as a job provider, which forced citizens to find jobs with the help of acquaintances or by paying bribes to those who might help them.

Syria's unemployment rate was also worsened by pre-war droughts, which undermined the household income of citizens whose living depended on agriculture, and which caused people to move from the countryside to urban areas. The agricultural sector, which had always occupied a significant place in the Syrian economy, was negatively affected as a result of the regime not taking necessary precautions that would have lessened the impact of a severe 4-year drought; this lack of planning led to serious economic losses among citizens who made their livings from land (Saleeby, 2012). In terms of numbers, 800,000 Syrian peasants and herders lost their livelihoods (Femia & Werrell, 2012), and between 2 and 3 million Syrians were pushed to extreme poverty (Worth, 2010). And because the drought prompted a dense migration flow from the countryside to urban regions of Syria, unemployment increased in the country's urban provinces (Saleeby, 2012). Further, as a result of the former Lebanon Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri falling victim to assassination in 2005, the world suspected the Syrian regime of foul play, and the United States pressured Syria to withdraw its military units, which had been present since 1976, from Lebanon. As a result of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, the Syrian citizens who had worked in Lebanon were forced to return to Syria, and this too increased the country's unemployment (Abboud & Arslanian, 2008). Therefore, although the regime's detention and torture of the children in Daraa was determined to serve as the event that led to the Syrian civil war, it is clear that severe drought as well as citizens returning from Lebanon to Daraa due to geographical proximity played important roles in the events that took place in Daraa (Süer, 2012).

Additional economic problems, such as increasing real estate and food prices, also contributed to war in Syria. James Gelvin stated that in the pre-Arab Spring period, food prices had reached high levels, and because the government was no longer providing subsidies to the poor and low-income factions of society, the average family in Syria was obliged to spend at least 35% of its income on food. Bassam Haddad noted the importance of subsidies for Syria's poor citizens. He stated that while the citizens in this low-income group were able to cover their basic needs, such as wheat, oil, and sugar, via subsidies, they were pushed further into poverty once the subsidies ceased (Haddad, 2012). Haddad stated that even between the years of 2003 and 2004, 5.1 million Syrian citizens (30.1% of the overall population in Syria) were living below the poverty line, and 2 million of these individuals were unable to meet even their basic daily needs (Haddad, 2005). Further, while Syria's overall poverty rate was 34.3% a year before the war broke out, roughly 62% of those who lived in the countryside were impoverished (Berzins, 2013).

Last but not least, one additional economic problem that pre-war Syria faced was a housing problem. Under Bashar al-Assad's economic policies, the state no longer controlled rents, and this served to increase the housing costs among low- and middle-income Syrian citizens (Hinnebusch, 2012). In addition, the presence of Iraqi refugees who had taken refuge in Syria during the 2003 Iraq War increased the demand for housing, which further increased real estate prices in Syria and made for increased economic problems among Syria's poorer citizens (Raphaeli, 2007).

The Social Reasons behind Syria's Civil War

While the aforementioned economic problems contributed to the war in Syria, they alone are insufficient to explain the initiation of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian people faced a number of other problems – specially, social problems – that also primed the country for war. From the Hafez al-Assad period until 2011, the year the war broke out, the regime controlled the people through fear and violence and by shutting down any opposition to the government.

Although Syria had become an independent state in 1946, after remaining under French mandate for 26 years, the country did not emerge as a politically or economically stable state. Since Syria gained independence, ideological in-party conflicts, especially among the Sunni elites, continuously disrupted the country's democratic efforts, and incessant military coups served as the most conspicuous signs of turbulent political life in Syria. In the period subsequent to independence, the Sunni elites held the high cadres in their hands in state government, so they expected that their seats in state politics were guaranteed, and they were not terribly interested in military (Tekdal Fildiş, 2012). However, the ideological contentions of the Sunni elites resulted in military coups time after time, and this led to the Sunnis slowly being purged from the government cadres, leaving the Nusayri Alawites to fill their positions (Karabat, 2013).

The Defense Minister at the time, Hafez al-Assad, wanted to turn the trauma associated with the loss of Golan Heights in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, into his advantage. With the support of the military, he successfully carried out a bloodless coup in 1970 such that he prevailed over Salah Jadid, also an Alawite, and seized management of the state. Hafez al-Assad became the first Alawite president of Syria via a 1971 referendum, and he laid the foundation that would lead to 40 years of dictatorial rule under the Assad family. This rule would ultimately prompt a civil war in Syria.

After seizing state power, Hafez al-Assad's first priority was achieving loyalty. Father Assad, who took lessons from the political past, eliminated threats to his regime by placing Alawites in the high administrative and military cadres. These individuals came primarily from his clan, so he could count on their loyalty. Further, in order to create "malleable citizens" who would comply with rule, Hafez al-Assad assumed authority over the people by means of military, intelligence (al-Mukhabarat), and security services (Martin, 2015). The majority of interviewees stated that they feared the Mukhabarat quite a lot, so they did not talk about politics either in public places or in their own homes, as they believed that even their private walls had ears in Syria. Dawud, a Syrian refugee in Hatay, talked about how the Syrian secret police affected the people:

Intelligence in all Arab countries, not only in Syria, serves to oppress the people. When a car full of intelligence agents comes to a village, all of the people in the village become terrified. Even if only one intelligence agent comes to the village, all of the people in the village become terrified. Do you know what people do when Bashar appears? Nobody is able to even see him. They do nothing, but people fear them. I have been a governmental official in Idlib for 17 years. You know, I didn't hate the Syrian government, but when they pass in the road, I become so terrified. Intelligence is so severe. Even if you do nothing wrong, you feel terrified when they're near. You know, our people and all Arabs need a dictator. But intelligence should be more tolerant. They should bring those who have done bad things to justice, but they should leave those who haven't done bad things alone. They never mind; they take those who do bad things as well as those who don't do anything wrong. Intelligence in Syria takes all people, no matter whether those people have done bad things or not, no matter if they are women, babies, or old people.

Dawud's comments were in line with what the majority of other interviewees had to say. Mehmet, who was interviewed in Gaziantep, stated that "if one gets inside the intelligence headquarter he or she is considered dead, and the one who gets out is considered a new born." The arbitrary deeds and tortures of Mukhabarat and the regime security forces were not limited to those

individuals who acted against the regime; the families of the individuals being punished for their dissidence were punished as well. For instance, if a person was imprisoned in Syria, he or she was abandoned and forgotten by society, and it was as though the individual's record was deleted from the birth register; however, this practice was not applied to convicts' relatives (Soyalan, 2013). Rather, relatives were obliged to pay the price for being related to a convict. The point of this was to enable to regime to punish and control not only those in prison but to control every one else as well (Soyalan, 2013). Rasheed, a Syrian interviewee in Gaziantep, had this to say on the matter:

I am not permitted to hold a passport, and I don't know why. My relative was classified as a member of the Islamic Brotherhood in 1983. He is not my cousin. He is my father's cousin, and I don't know this guy. I don't know him, as our tribe is large. Yet I was charged because of something he did. In addition, I applied for multiple positions in government, but I was rejected because that guy is considered my uncle. I don't know that guy, and I have no connection with him. When they imprisoned him, I was five years old. This is my story, but it is also the story of many other Syrians. There are about 3,000 or 4,000 people in my family who are not permitted to have passports. Almost 40% of Syrians are prevented from having passports for similar reasons. My cousin was about to graduate from law school. He was on the honor list, and they prevented him from getting a position in government because a member of the family was in the Islamic Brotherhood. They forced him to stay home and forget all that he had studied throughout his life.

According to a number of interviewees, after the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion was quelled through blood in Hama during the Hafez al-Assad period, the Sunni citizens who were thought to have any connection to the Muslim Brotherhood movement were deprived of some rights and were kept from being hired to fill positions in government offices. Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in 1970 via military coup and became president in 1971, encountered opposition in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, whose members consist primarily of individuals in the Sunni urban merchant class, began to overtly criticize the regime when Hafez al-Assad wanted to put a secular Constitution into effect in 1973, thus removing the article that stated that Islam was the religion of the state. The primary reason behind the Muslim Brotherhood, and why they demonstrated such opposition to the regime, had to do with the fact that the Sunnis had lost power and they were now being ruled by an Alawite ruler. The Muslim Brotherhood's objections to the new Constitution draft, as well as the anti-regime protests in Hama and Homs, prompted Hafez al-Assad to take a step back regarding the new Constitution. In order to silence the ascendant voices of opposition against him, he added an article stating that the president of country should be Muslim. However, when Hafez al-Assad changed the course of the war by siding with the Christian Maronites against the Palestinian Muslim clique in the 1976 Lebanon War, he prompted voices of dissent, such as those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, to grow louder (Şenzybek, 2013). At the end of 1979, a military officer named Ibrahim al Yousuf executed 83 Nusayri Alawite students in Aleppo Artillery, and the regime held the Muslim Brotherhood responsible from the executions (Gümüşlüoğlu, 2013). Between 1979 and 1981, the radical branch of the Muslim Brotherhood caused close to 300 assassinations in Syria (Gümüşlüoğlu, 2013). When the Muslim Brotherhood's assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad on June 26th, 1980, failed, Hafez al-Assad began to assume a more offensive attitude against the Muslim Brotherhood (Mercan, 2012). The day following the assassination attempt, Hafez al-Assad issued an order that prompted the massacre of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members in the Tedmour prison; the massacre was carried out by Assad's brother Refaat al-Assad (Lund, 2011). After this incident, Law no:49 was enacted on July 7th, 1980; it was stated that the penalty for being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood would be capital punishment. However, this did not settle the conflict between the parties, and when it reached its climax in February 1982, Hafez al-Assad gave his brother Refaat al-Assad the order to organize military operations and head to Hama, which was considered the center of the movement; the objective was to quell the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Mercan, 2012). As a result of this

incident, which became known as the “Hama massacre,” approximately 10,000 to 30,000 Muslim Brotherhood members were killed, and more than 100,000 people were internally displaced (Ataman, 2012). What was experienced in Hama not only enabled father Assad to annihilate the most powerful internal threat to his regime, but it also made clear to the Syrian people that he was not above slaughtering his own people if it meant the survival of his regime.

When Bashar al-Assad first came to power in Syria in 2000, he pledged that government would employ democratic strategies and that the economy, education, and administration of the state would be modernized according to the needs of the time (Hinnebusch, 2009). Throughout this period, which was called the Damascus Spring, primarily academic and intellectual segments of society, which benefited from the relatively free political environment the regime granted, had formed forums so as to determine and outline favorable conditions in order to convince the regime to carry out reform (Lundgren-Jörum, 2012). In September 2000, the opposition groups published the “Manifesto of the 99,” which was the first declaration of the Damascus Spring, which very clearly called on the regime to make political, economic, and legal reforms (Ulutaş, 2011). In December 2000, a couple of months after the first manifesto was published, a second manifesto, the “Manifesto of the 1,000” was published. Both manifestos demanded freedom of the media, lifting of the 1963 martial law, release of political prisoners, and a freer political environment (Lust-Okar, 2006). However, the political discourse of the Manifesto of the 1,000 had a bitter tone compared to the Manifesto of the 99, and since it proposed ending the one-party rule, it directly targeted the regime (Ulutaş, 2011). Not long after, the regime arrested some of the activists associated with Damascus Spring and, as such, this short-lived democratic initiative failed (Lundgren-Jörum, 2012).

In October 2005, the opposition groups in Syria published a manifesto called the “Damascus Declaration.” This was an important document since it was signed by both Arab and Kurdish parties, including those who were banned by the regime (Wikas, 2007). In May 2006, 250 members of the opposition groups signed the “Beirut-Damascus Declaration,” which not only called upon the government to initiate reform, but also criticized the government’s policies regarding Lebanon (Wikas, 2007). Not long after, the regime decided that these declarations served American and Israel conspiracies regarding Syria. As a result, 12 people who had signed the Damascus Declaration were arrested and were sentenced to between 3 and 6 years imprisonment (Ulutaş, 2011). In sum, Bashar al-Assad pledged reform when he first seized power in Syria, but he took no apparent steps to upend the extant policies and procedures, which suggested to the people that he was no different than his father (Salik, 2011).

In addition to the social issues cited above, the interviewees suggested another factor behind the war in Syria, and it has to do with the ethnic discrimination that the regime encouraged. Rahman, a Syrian interviewee in Gaziantep, explained the relationship between the Sunnis and Alawis before the war:

There was no difference between Sunnis and Alawis before the war. I am Sunni, and all my friends are Alawis. My partner, who was an officer in the Syrian regime, is Alawi. He is still working in the regime, and we have a contact with one another. We also have good relationships with Christians in the other village, Hayan. They marry us, and we marry them. We used work together, and we had no problems before Bashar al-Assad encouraged religious discrimination. We didn’t even ask one another about religion. Even in the war, the regime spread religion-based rumors via advertisements, and this too was to promote religious discrimination. We didn’t ask people about their religious categories. We were all brothers and didn’t know about these issues. They started after the war started. Our problem with Alawis or Sunnis or any religion is that we are against anyone with al-Assad. That is it. We never mind whether he is Alawi, Sunni, or from any other religious category. But we mind if he is with al-Assad or against al-Assad. We protected several churches from deconstruction when we entered Sulaymaniyah. We took pictures for these churches, and you can browse through them on the

Internet. Some journalists even came and reported on how we protected some religious places. We did not discriminate against churches or mosques, or Shias or Sunnis, or Alawis. We are concerned only with those who support Bashar.

Nearly all of the interviewees stated that all of the people in Syria were living together peacefully before the civil war began, and there were no major problems between the country's different ethno-religious groups. However, even though the majority of the interviewees stated that there were no problems between the Sunnis and Alawites in Syria in daily life, they also noted that the Alawites have had more privileges than the Sunnis. They stated that this was due to the discriminatory policies implemented at the start of the Hafez al-Assad period. Interviewees mentioned that Sunnis and Alawites were not granted equal opportunities, and only Alawites were hired for government and military positions.

Due to their beliefs and religious practices, the Alawites, which constituted approximately 12% of the overall Syrian population, were considered ghulat (extremists) and were subjected to persecution from time to time by their Sunni counterparts due to their excessive beliefs (Talhamy, 2010). In addition, impoverished Alawites who lived in one of the Syria's most isolated regions, an area known as Alawite mountains, worked as peasants on the farms of wealthy Sunni and Christians (Tekdal Fildiş, 2012). During the mandate period in Syria, in order to prevent the formation of a united Arab nationalist movement against itself, France formed military units called "Troupes Spéciales du Levant" and was especially sure to include minorities in these units in order to separate them from the Sunni majority. The Alawites who viewed these military units as means of securing economic opportunities for themselves, and who saw them as a chance to enter into a career, flocked en masse to the military units (Faksh, 1984). The urban Sunnis, however, saw the military as a means of French imperialism in Syria, so they found joining the military contrary to their ideologies (Hof & Simon, 2013). Therefore, they paid fees in hopes of exempting their sons from military service (Faksh, 1984). However, according to Patrick Seale, the Sunni elites' approach to the military was an historical mistake (Tekdal Fildiş, 2012). When Syria became independent, 25% of these units consisted of Alawites, and these units were transformed into the regular Syrian army (Maoz, 1991). Because the Sunnis did not recognize the importance of army at its outset, the majority of the military was made up of Alawites, which meant that the power balance in Syrian politics shifted from away from the Sunnis and toward the Alawites (Tekdal Fildiş, 2012). Further, the Ba'ath Party, which was founded in 1947, held a secular and socialist stance that did not place emphasis on Islam and thus defended social equality. Further, the party's stance regarding Arab nationalism caused minority groups, such as the Alawites, Druzes, İsmailis, and Christians, to take greater interest in the party (Şenzeybek, 2013), which led these groups to become party members.

While the Sunnis were predominant in the state government, in-party conflicts between them brought about numerous military coups, and each new coup caused the Sunnis to gradually being purged from the upper government cadres, which allowed for the Alawites to climb in ranks with the state government (Pipes, 1989). When Hafez al-Assad initiated a bloodless coup and defeated his rival Salah Jadid, who was also an Alawite like himself, Syria, for the first in its history, was governed by an Alawite president. Hafez al-Assad who had taken lessons from the past, firmly established his regime by placing people from his own sect in the state's high-level government and military cadres. This truth serves to support the interviewees' claims that the Alawites had greater voices among the military and administrative units. However, it is necessary to state that the regime in Syria was not an Alawite regime but a patrimonial dictatorship, and the Alawites made up just one of the pillars that served to keep the regime alive (Goldsmith, 2011).

Finally, although the interviewees stated that there was no major conflict between different sectarian factions during the pre-war period, the crisis in Syria and eventually the war gradually began to gain a sectarian dimension as well. One of the main causes of this was that Bashar al-Assad

manipulated the Alawites by playing on their historical fears, and he did this in order to keep the Alawites on his side as the war broke out (Phillips, 2015). Except for a minority segment, the majority of the Alawites in Syria were unable to realize much benefit from Bashar al-Assad's economic policies (Goldsmith, 2012). As such, to keep them from turning against him, Bashar convinced the majority of Alawites that radical jihadists, such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat-al Nusra ve Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) might annihilate them due to their religious identities should the regime fall (Hawari, 2016). Further, subsequent to the outbreak of the war, the Bashar regime utilized the *Shabbiha* units, which consist predominantly of Alawites, and he did this in order to repress the Sunni opposition. The atrocities and massacres the Shabbihas carried out, however, only prompted the Sunnis to stand more firmly against the regime and the Alawites, which strengthened the sectarian dimension of the war (Berti & Paris, 2014). The Alawites' beliefs that the Sunnis would hold them responsible from the atrocities committed by the Shabbihas, as well as their beliefs that the Sunnis would assume a vengeful stance against them should the regime fall, encouraged the Alawites to see to it that the regime survived. Finally, it is important to note here the effect that non-state actors had with regard to the sectarian dimension of the Syrian war. Since 2011, the year during which protests broke out in Syria, Lebanon Hezbollah, Iran, and Iraq's Shia Islamist militants provided both political and military support to the Bashar regime (Smyth, 2015). While the regime continued to garner Shia support, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey lent their support to the opposition, and this also served to shape the sectarian aspect to the crisis (Hawari, 2016). Because the aforementioned countries' involvement in the Syrian crisis was prompted by their interest in protecting their regional benefits and security rather than by sectarian feelings (Berti & Paris, 2014), and because the United States and Russia became involved in the crisis in terms of diplomacy and military, Syria's war is not only a regime versus anti-regime civil war; rather, it also serves as a proxy war for regional and global interests.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring that began in the Middle East in December 2010 made its way to Syria in March 2011, and the peaceful demonstrations initiated by the Syrian people's demands for freedom, democracy, and better living conditions transformed into a civil war thanks largely to the regime's violent responses to the protestors. In particular, the torture of children in Daraa who were caught by regime forces putting anti-regime on a wall served as the final straw for many people and signalled to citizens that it was time to upend the 40-year rein of Syria's dictatorial rule. What occurred in Daraa was only one of the human rights violations that became commonplace during the pre-war period in Syria, but it was enough to prompt the country to implode, as the people had grown weary after weathering so many socioeconomic problems for so long. A high unemployment rate that affected primarily high-school educated youth, income inequality, and increasing poverty among the majority of the population were some of the basic economic problems in Syria in the period prior to the outbreak of war. Additional economic factors behind the start of the war include Bashar al-Assad's neo-liberal economic policies, which served very few while pushing the majority into poverty; the fall of the once-important agricultural sector due to government neglect and poorly planning with regard to severe drought; the migration of people from the countryside to the cities when they could no longer depend on the agricultural sector to sustain them; and increased real estate prices resulting from increased demands for housing due to the presence of Iraqi refugees who fled the war in 2003. All of these factors, along with increased food prices and reduced subsidies, served to negatively affect poor and low-income citizens' purchasing power and quality of life, which primed to country for a civil war.

In addition to the economic reasons, the regime's use of fear and repression to control the people, and its lack of tolerance of any opposition, served as the social factors that contributed to the war. Since the period of Hafez al-Assad, Assad's ability to oppress the most effective opposition

movement of the time via violence left a deep imprint in the memory of the Syrian people, and this prevented the formation of an effective opposition movement against the regime. Unlike his father, when Bashar al-Assad first came to power in Syria, he promised that he would implement economic and political reform; however, after a few nominally democratic acts, he, like his father, chose to rule via repression and intimidation in hopes of protecting his regime. In addition, and as the Syrian refugees noted, although there were no major problems between the Sunnis and Alawites in daily life in pre-war Syria, when the regime was unable to stop the protestors with reform initiatives, it tapped into the Alawites' historical fears in order to secure their support against the Sunni protestors. The government also benefited from paramilitary forces such as Shabbiha, as these forces suppressed the opposition. These factors added a sectarian dimension to the war. Further, to protect their regional benefits and security, Iran, Lebanon Hezbollah, and Iraqi Islamist Shia militants backed the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey' sided with the opposition; this further helped to shape the sectarian dimension of the Syrian civil war.

Presently, in Syria, where the war is approaching its seventh year, conflict and human rights violations continue and will gradually worsen if the sources of the conflict are not addressed. An end to violence is essentially conditional on international actors setting aside their particular self-interests in order to take concrete steps aimed at ending the Syrian war. Today, the existence of externally supported groups, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, is not only an overt threat to Syria's territorial integrity, but it also poses a security threat to the world's countries. If the Syrian crisis is not adequately addressed in the long term, it might result in additional problems having to do with the security of regional powers, increased risk of ethno-sectarian conflicts, violent acts carried out by terror organizations in the region, and additional human rights violations and civilian deaths. Further, this could result in new refugee flows, which are not without their own problems. At this juncture, it is conditional on other countries taking concrete steps to demilitarize Syria in order to wrest control from terrorist groups and restore the country's stability. Restoring order to Syria and rebuilding the country will be a great feat, and before anything else can be done, countries must cease supporting both domestic and foreign fighters in Syria regardless of their alliance to the al-Assad regime; this is the only way to ensure that conditions will allow Syrian to recover. By facilitating a peaceful environment in Syria, outside agents will assist in bringing order to the region, which will pave the way for millions of Syrian citizens to return to their homes. This will also in turn lessen the burdens experienced by Syrian refugees' host countries, as they will be in the position to reallocate their resources and more efficiently address the needs of their citizens.

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