Key factors that made Syria prone to facing Uprising in 2011 and Analysis of the Uprising Escalation in 2011-2012

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2011 年の民衆蜂起を起こりやすくした主要な要因および 2011 〜 2012 年の蜂起激化の考察

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概　略

　今日のシリアは 40 万人以上の犠牲者および数百万人の難民と国内避難民を生んだ内戦によって滅ぼされた国である。本論文はシリアにおいて内戦に発展した蜂起を起こりやすくした複数の主要な要因の特定に焦点を当てている。この要因は国内（政治的、社会的、経済的、環境的）から外国（シリアを取り巻く地域的および国際の要因）のものまである。検出された要因のタイムラインは内部要因から始まり、2011 年の蜂起に終わる。続いて、本論文においては、汚職を非難し、改革を求める平和的抗議から始まり、2012 年に反政府運動と残酷な内戦へと発展した蜂起の激化を考察している。平和的抗議が暴力に変わった過程と理由を理解するために、2011 年と 2012 年の間に起きた三つの主要な「軸」が分析されている。本論文においては、上記の期間中に起き、脆弱な国家を作り出すことに直接的または間接的なインパクトを持った出来事や事件の歴史的分析を手法としている。その他に、紛争の激化を分析するに当たり三つの主要な軸を分析するためにエリート操作理論を活用している。本論文によるシリア紛争の考察は 2012 年までに限定している。

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Introduction

Introduction

　　Syria was ruled by an autocrat-family based regime in the name of the secular pan-Arab national-socialist Ba'ath party, which declared a state of emergency in the country for more than 40 years. The 2011 uprising in Syria was not the first revolt and protest against the Ba'ath regime. The use of violence by the regime towards people to suppress their demands was not a new strategy as well, as the first uprising against the regime, in 1982, was bloodily suppressed. It is certain that the regime change and transition from an autocratic one to a democratically ruled government possessed an increased risk of an eruption of a civil conflict (Cederman, Hug, and Krebs 2010). While some researchers considered economic grievances as one of the main reasons behind the "revolt against crony capitalism" (Butter 2015: 10), or the "uprising of more marginalized social groups" (Azmeh 2014: 4), this paper emphasizes the necessity to understand and analyze main challenges Syria was facing externally and internally before the uprising.

　　The Arab Spring and the sentimental calling for change and democracy in the Middle East did not spare the military-ruled bastion, Syria. Protests started on March 15, 2011 in the ancient Jordan-bordered city of Dar'a, when high school children wrote some 'Arab Spring' inspired slogans on school walls. The slogans were the same ones used in the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It stated, 'the people want to topple the regime,' and resulted in local secret police arresting and detaining 15 high school boys. The main person responsible for the secret police in Dar'a was Bashar al-Assad's close

cousin, General Atef Najeeb. The secret police brutally beat and tortured the high school boys, while the families' peaceful attempt to free their children from detainment was met by bullets from the secret service. This single incident of cruelty by the secret police inflamed the protests, which quickly spread in almost every city in the country. The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad responded to the protests by rejecting the decision to step down and adopting a full use of force against protesters.

According to the Human Rights Watch World Report-Syria in 2018 around, 400,000 people were killed because of the Syrian conflict since 2011; 12.8 million were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria; around 5 million seeking refuge abroad; over 6 million people displaced internally (World Report-Syria 2018).

Key factors that made Syria prone to Uprising in 2011

I. Internal Factors
I. I. Empty promises by the Syrian regime

After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father's presidency, Syria may have looked like a stable country at a first sight, but the country was facing many problems. Among them were underdevelopment, corruption, unemployment, and high population growth. The young president promised political and economical reforms and changes in the country, raising optimistic hopes on both domestic and international levels (Raphaeli 2007, Borshchevskaya 2010). Bashar al-Assad initially inspired many by his ideology for democratic reforms. However, after the Damascus spring of political and social debates started in 2000 and 2001, he arrested all the political activists who wanted fair and free democratic elections. Thus, most critics felt that Basahr al-Assad had failed to deliver his pledged reforms. There was a dilemma about the kind of leadership that could be offered to a faltering authoritarian country in the current world. He was faced with challenges on how to strengthen and liberalize the country's economy without losing power. In his first months in office as a president, he sought to build a Syrian version of the "China Model." He wanted to legitimately build a country by carefully calibrating political reforms. After assuming power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad assured the people of Syria that his regime would introduce economic reforms such as opening modern markets that allow foreign investments (Kerr and Larkin 2015).

He also promised to liberalize the economy and allow foreign banks to operate in Syria. This happened after a big number of Syrians expressed their desire of having economic reforms first before political ones, as economic reforms could lift them out of poverty. However, countervailing local interests of a few oligarchs hindered various attempts to reform. Additionally, the centralized socialist type of economy made the dream impossible. The Assad government remained repressive and became more stultified. The regime of Bashar took hesitant reform measures in the financial markets, because it realized that strong private markets need a strong banking sector, which could guarantee proper processes of selling foreign currency. The government enacted a new banking law in 2001 that provided better environments for private banking (Vloeberghs 2015).

Focusing on the service sector, the policies that were in place helped few citizens, particularly those who had links with the Assad regime and few members of the Sunni merchants based in Aleppo and Damascus (Kerr and Larkin 2015). Despite his promises for political reforms, and despite achieving some positive steps towards liberalization just after six months of his presidency, Bashar proceeded with the same style of leadership whereby he banned all public gatherings and made it illegal for more than five people to converge in one place. Bashar gave the security apparatus the power of arresting and

detaining people, particularly those in opposition. Although Bashar showed that he wanted to improve the human rights state, he failed to do so after taking power. The rights of association, free expression, and assembly were prohibited in Syria during Bashar's presidency as it was during his father's. The authorities used the power they were given to arrest, harass, and imprison critics of the government and human rights activists (Kerr and Larkin 2015).

I. II. Oil Industry

Oil reserves in the country were limited and it could not keep up with the rapidly increasing social and economic challenges, while, at the same time, the economic and political system was based on oil. Such economic system was "clearly unsustainable and needed external funding to be maintained" (Azmeh 2014: 10).

Furthermore, the Syrian oil sector was facing problems, since the oil production decreased from 518,000 bpd in 2000 to 405,000 bpd in 2006. The International Monetary Fund warned the Syrian government that having their budget relying on oil revenues with recent fiscal policies is not sustainable. The Syrian debt increased from 18.6 percent of GDP in 2000 to reach 37.9 percent in 2006 (IMF Country Report No. 06/295: 18-19). The following chart shows the Syrian production and consumption of oil since 1980 until 2010 (Tverberg 2014):
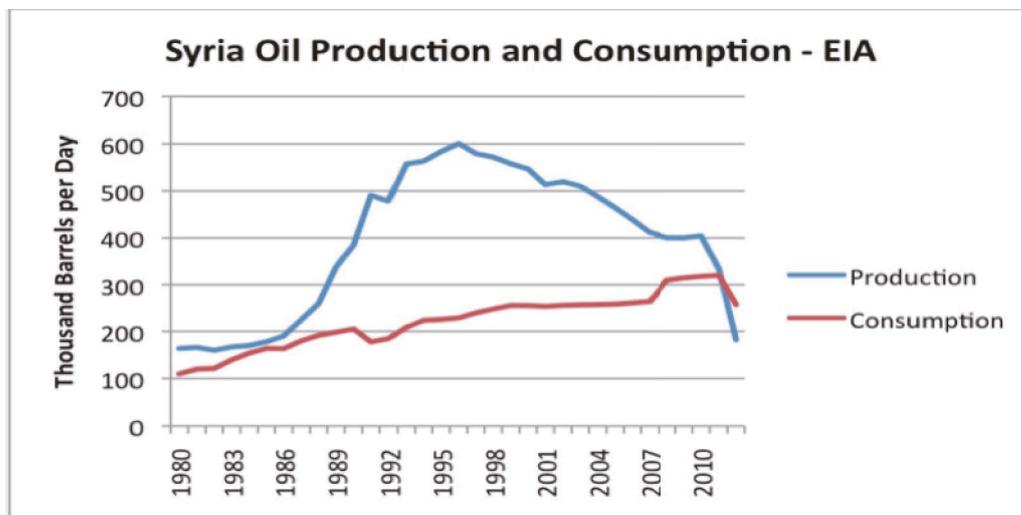

Figure 1: Syria's Oil Production and Consumption (Source: Tverberg Gail, Our Finite World, 2014)

The Syrian government failure to successfully activate manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and rejection to increase tax collection, only made Syria fully dependent on oil as the main income source for the country. However, declining oil production with increasing local consumption transformed Syria from an oil exporter to an oil importer (Azmeh 2014).

The Syrian government searched for solutions. One of them was signing a trade agreement with the Iraqi government to supply Syria with Iraqi crude oil, through the Kirkuk-Banias pipeline, in exchange of exporting consumption goods to Iraq; which was considered a violation for the UN sanctions on Iraq. The amount of smuggled oil was estimated to be 200,000 b/p. Syria was confronted many times in the Security Council with these violations, and the response was that they were just testing the pipelines. The flow of the Iraqi oil stopped only after the US invasion in 2003. The Syrian government tried to

restart getting supplied by crude oil from Iraq, but the US prevented that from happening in order to keep the pressure on Syria to stop the proliferation of Jihadist across the Syrian borders (Raphaeli 2007).

According to the IMF report in 2006 (IMF Country Report No. 06/295) Syria urgently needed to boost growth in order to diversify, expand production and export, and absorb a bulge of a rapid population growth into the market before oil resources were drained. The ability of the country to cover the welfare system, the public sector, and state-owned companies were under question due to the rapid decline of its oil industry (Dorstal 2009).

I. III. The Emergence of a New Business Class and Corruption

Hafez al-Assad's rule from 1970 to 2000 made the government exclusive; only Ba'athi members could have the chance to hold a significant position in the country. By the mid 1980s, the main reason for Syrian people to join the Ba'ath party was to gain political and financial benefits, not because they were attracted to the ideology of the party. Key officials in the country were demanding bribes for any significant commerce fearless of being held accountable. Bashar al-Assad succeeded a chaotic and culturally corruption-accepting system. By promising to tackle the corruption, he grew optimism in the Syrian people. However, he was only successful in decreasing corruption among the lower levels of the government officials, while corruption increased at higher levels (Borshchevskaya 2010).

Both the promised reforms of Bashar al-Assad and the gradual "opening" policy had an impact on creating a new business class in the country. New elites were forming from extended family ties of those already in power (Daher 2018, Butter 2016). Using their close ties with the regime circles, they had a share in all major areas of the Syrian economy, which made them direct beneficiaries of the new policy of state-led-development and partial liberalization. The "Social Market Economy" model that the regime adopted in 2000, only gave them wider access to national wealth and made it easier to monopolize the private sector of the country. What changed then is that "the elite's access to wealth was a direct function of their being embedded in the threads of regime power through social and familiar association" (Abboud 2013: 3). The identity of the business elite in Syria was shadowed and kept in secret. Due to the absence of publicly available information, a Syrian economics magazine, Aliqtisadi, took over a year to publish the names of some top class businessmen in Syria. Yet, the published names were under suspicion, because some of the key people in the system, like the cousin of the president and a controversial businessman Rami Makhlouf, were not mentioned (Daher 2018, Borshchevskaya 2010).

From 2000, the new political and economic elite in the country started changing the core principles of the old regime that made Hafez al-Assad successfully rule the country. The New Elite rumbled the principles that Hafez al-Assad established, such as offering energy and agricultural subsidies and ensuring public sector employment. On the surface, the aim of the new policies and changes was increasing the national growth by opening Syria to regional and international trade and investment, which will make the country realize self-development in the short and long terms. But the reality showed that integration in the global economy was an opportunity for a firmly regime-connected new elite to self-benefit from regional and international trade, which was particularly visible in the financial domain. Eventually, the new adopted policies failed to deal with accumulated social and economic issues, resulting in harmful consequences to main social groups that had a key role in preserving and nurturing the Ba'ath governance (Azmeh 2014, Haddad 2011)

It is true that Hafez al-Assad allowed for the emergence of dependent business elites who came from mixed social and political backgrounds. They were not directly connected with the regime nor had family connections, but they were

politically reliant on the regime. Yet, after Bashar al-Assad came to presidency, and despite their loyalty to the regime, they started losing their businesses and share of the wealth. For example, one significant businessman, from the Sanqar family, lost an exclusive contract to import luxurious cars to Rami Makhlouf, a member of the ruling family (Aston-Ward 2017, Butter 2015, Abboud 2013).

When it comes to the economic and regulatory system in Syria before the conflict, according to 2016 Index of Economy Freedom, repressive economic measures by the Syrian state caused the marginalization of the private sector and blocked sustainable development. Monetary freedom was ruined by long and complete domination of the state as Syrian institutions were highly corrupted lacking any public accountability. According to Gobat and Kostial, more than 80 companies had to bribe officials in order to "get things done" (Gobat and Kostial 2016: 5). The judicial system was also far from being independent and transparent. Stagnation continued while the government kept adopting repression as a principle and tool for controlling the situation (Index of Economy Freedom 2016).

A mixture of state-business deals that were mostly done through informal networks resulted in unstable and stagnant Syrian economy. Developing ties between high government officials and elites from the business domain only decreased the potential of the state enterprises and private sector (Daher 2018, Astan-Ward 2017, Haddad 2011). Countries with unequal economic development and controversial government-close business elite might not be a strange phenomenon around the globe, but they are considered as "catalysts for uprising and revolutions" (Butter 2016: 11)

I. IV. Poverty and Unemployment

Syria was facing problems with high unemployment in addition to the rapid growth of population. In 1990, the population in Syria was around 12.1 million, and by 2003 the population growth increased to reach 17.4 million. With this rapid growth, around 300,000 young Syrians were searching for work every year. Thus, due to the lack of investments in the country that was also a result of the political climate, work opportunities could not match the market demand (Daher 2018, Raphaeli 2007).

According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, youth unemployment in 2009 was estimated to be around 48 percent, 6 percent higher than the unemployment rate among adults. Most of the unemployed population, around 54.2 percent, was in rural areas (IFAD 2011). Rapid rural-urban migration was also a result of the inefficiency of the agricultural sector at providing work prospects for the gradually increasing young labor population. Public and state-owned institutions were facing the same problems like agricultural sector (de Chatel 2014, Azmeh 2014).

In fact, accurate records of unemployment were controversial since the government manipulated those numbers for political reasons. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that the unemployment rate was near 18 percent. In order to keep unemployment rates low, the government kept recruiting governmental clerks, and it was assumed that half of Syrians were living off government incomes. Clearly, the situation was not sustainable and there was a dire need to decrease unemployment. For that purpose, there was then a desperate need for foreign investments. That was not possible because of the regional isolation that Syria faced at the time (Raphaeli 2007, Borshchevskaya 2010, Landis 2012).

Syria was challanged by a serious gap between economic development and growth. Poverty was increasing in rural areas much more than it was in urban ones, and the residents of rural areas did not see any benefits from new economic liberalization reforms (Gobat and Kostial 2016). The poverty ratio in Syria from 1997~2007 was the highest in the

northeastern region, and the statistics of national lower poverty line exposed how inefficient the governmental efforts were. The chart below shows the inconsistency between the actual national lower poverty line (LPL) and the targeted national poverty line (TPL). It demonstrates how the government's five-year plan for working on reducing poverty depended on inaccurate assumptions about the lower poverty line in Syria (Third National MDGs Progress Report 2010).
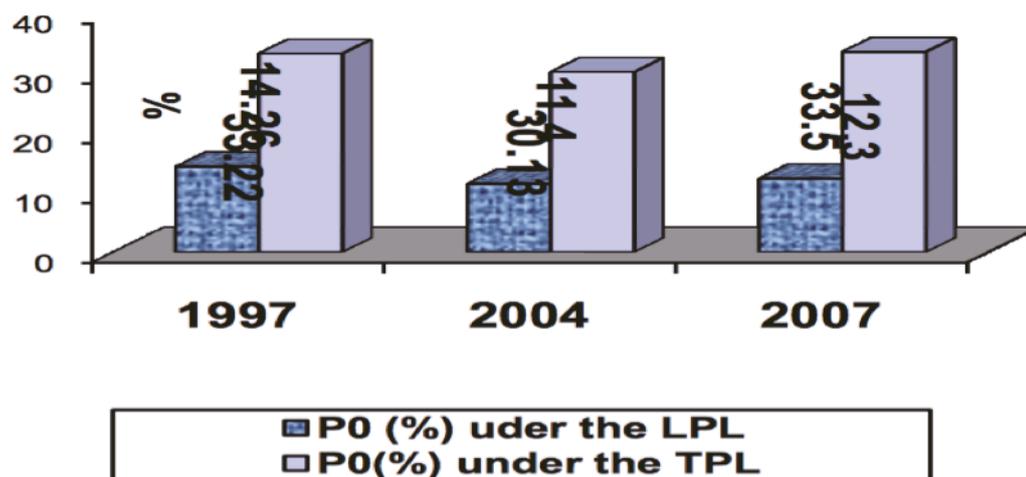

Figure 2: Changes in the Headcount Poverty Ratio (P0) under the national lines in Syria
(Source: Syrian Arab Republic, Third National MDGs Progress Report 2010)

The poverty ratio in Syria between 2000 and 2010 kept increasing, while local official specialists in this field in Syria kept providing an estimation of the poverty around 10 percent lower than what external sources were estimating, which was about 60 percent. By 2007, the percentage of extreme poverty (individuals unable to secure their basic needs) in 2007 was around 12 percent of the whole population of Syria, estimated to be around 2.4 million people. On the other hand, the ratio of poor people above poverty was 33.6 percent of the population, which is about 6.7 million people in the country, where the total population was around 19 million. The northeastern region of the country was the most affected by extreme poverty, where an estimation of 15.4 percent of the population lived in poverty. In general, the concentration of poverty was in rural areas of the country. It was estimated that 56 percent of the total population lived in poverty (Sara 2011). While the most of previous indicators were showing worsening economic situation, Khlebnikov (2014) claimed that in 2011, the economy in Syria, compared with other countries, like Egypt, was not very bad, despite the fact that both countries faced protests and demands for change.

I. I. V. Agricultural sector and environmental issues

The rapid growth of population in Syria, from around 3 million people in 1950 to over 22 million in 2012, was accompanied with many environmental issues, particularly those related to water and climatic conditions. Khlebnikov (2014: 2) does not consider the size of population as a potential risk for uprising, stating that the Syrian population was relatively small compared with that of Iraq or Egypt. However, the population itself was never the disputable matter. The conundrum was in the rapid growth of population in a country that faced other problems with climate change (drought) and "inefficient,

corrupt and rigid water management system that enabled large scale over-exploitation of water and land resources and disenfranchised rural communities" (de Chatel 2014: 25).

　　The increased population and resource mismanagement caused a high decline in renewable water per capita in the country. In addition, Syria was having huge problems with a series of droughts. Six austere droughts affected the country in the period between 1990 and 2012. The worst among them was a drought that severely hit Syria in 2009 and lasted until 2011. Experts described it as a "multisession, multilayer period of extreme drought that contributed to agricultural failures, economic dislocation, and population displacement" (Gleick 2014: 332, De Chatel 2014). The chart below shows the rapid increase of population in Syria from 1950~2013 that came along such series of distressing environmental problems (Gleick 2014).
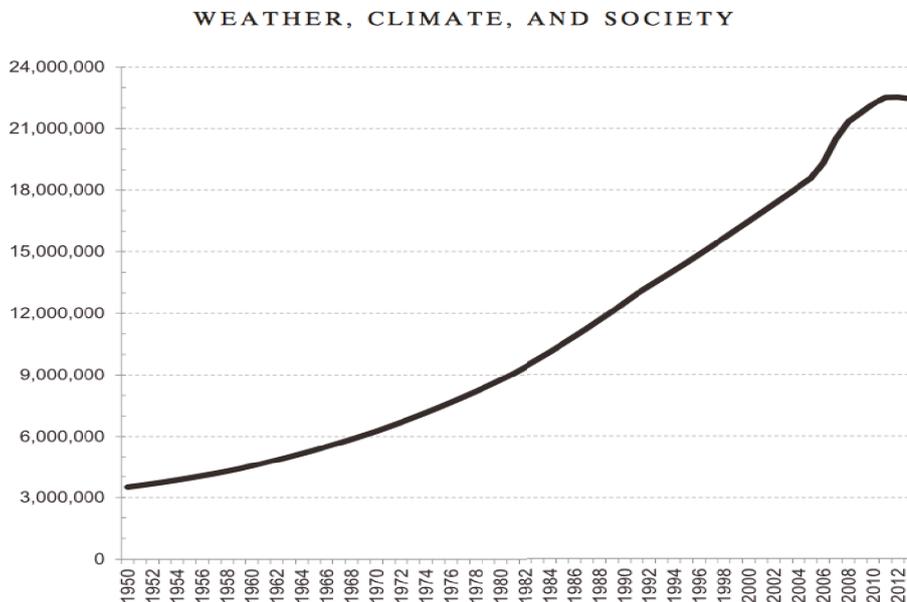

Figure 3: Population in Syria from 1950~2013
(Source: Gleick's "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria" 2014)

　　As examined in a previous section, Syria faced a big problem with the decline in oil production, which made the government adopt a new strategy concentrating on the agricultural sector, expecting economic growth and compensation for the losses in the oil sector. The agriculture sector used to play a very important role in the Syrian economy. Around 46 percent of the population in Syria (around 10 million) were rural residents, 80 percent of which were depending on agriculture for income (WFP Special Report 2013). However, that strategy had negative consequences on the environment in the country, resulting in the need for around one million peasants to receive international aid and food supplies (Daher 2018). Syria faced problems with deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and overgrazing (Daher 2018, Raphaeli 2007). The Millennium Development Goals report about Syria's National Progress also stated that among the multiple factors which were directly contributing to the problem of continuously increasing poverty in Syria, climate change had caused the degradation of the eco-system in the country (Third National MDGs Progress Report 2010)

　　Before the uprising in 2011, the communities in rural areas of the north and south of Syria were mostly affected by

increasing economic hardships. A severe drought that followed a shortage of rain in 2008 severely impacted the society, causing rural deprivation that pushed the population in rural areas to migrate to big cities. That resulted in increased poverty and socio-economic inequality in the society. In summery, a mix of rising new business elite with increasing poverty and inequality in the society was considered an explosive matter (Butter 2015, ACAPS 2013). Finally, it is important to add that some of the Syria conflict analysts considered that droughts, failed agricultural policies, water shortages, and mismanagement had direct impact on the spread of violence and the social structure falling apart in Syria (de Chatel 2014, Mohtadi 2012, Mhanna 2013).

II. External Factors
II. I. Complex relationship with the US and Sanctions

History of the relations between Syria and the United States of America (USA) goes back to 1949, when the government of the USA was sure that the Syrian independence from the French-administered mandate was fully and effectively achieved. However, the diplomatic relations between the two countries faced many ups and downs. The US-Syria diplomatic relations continued until 1967 when they were cut due to Arab-Israeli conflict. They were reestablished in 1974. Then, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated again and by 1979, Syria was listed on the State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism black list. The reason was the Syrian government's supporting and providing of safe havens to many terrorist organizations. From 1990 to 2001, the relations had improved a little to the level of having some cooperation between the two countries on certain regional issues (The US Fact Sheet 2014, Sharp 2011).

In 2003, the relations got worse and the USA imposed sanctions on Syria. The sanctions were registered under the name of the 'Syria Accountability Act'. They included the prohibition of US products (except for food and medicine), the freezing of Syrian overseas assets, and the prohibition on any kind of US business with Syria whether investing or operating in the country. By 2004, the sanctions extended to include blocking the property of certain people and that entailed the Commercial Bank of Syria. The Commercial Bank of Syria used to have the head vital role in the financial sector and development in the country. Among the many reasons for enacting sanctions on the Syrian Commercial Bank were issues involving huge money laundering activities. Upon investigation, the US treasury investigators found out that the government in Syria illegally used $580 million of Iraqi Governmental Funds to boost and support Syrian Businesses without prior approval from the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) (Levit 2010, Sharp 2011). It is worth mentioning that Syria was the only state that was listed by the US government as a terrorist sponsored state, while diplomatic relations were not totally blocked or stopped (GB: Parliament House of Lords 2007). Consequently, the US sanctions blocked any potential flow of money into the frail and underdeveloped Syrian economy with foreign direct investment. Syria was in desperate need for foreign investments to pave the road for creating new jobs in the rapidly worsening employment situation in the country (Raphaeli 2007). The impact of US sanctions on Syria did much more than only expressing the US Department's disagreement with the government in Syria. According to Yacoubian and Lasenski, the sanctions shook the atmosphere of trade and foreign investment in the country, creating a climate of doubt that had bigger impact on the economy than the sanctions did (Yacoubian and Lasenski 2008).

II. II. Stagnant Association Agreement with the EU

Bilateral relations between Syria and the European Union (EU) go back to 1977, when the Cooperation Agreement (CA) between representatives of Syria and the EU was signed and the CA functioned to set the trade regulations between Syria and the EU. According to the agreement, the EU would provide a duty-free access for Syrian industrial goods into the EU market, in addition to extending assistance in production and economic infrastructure to Syria. The CA had some modifications as amendments were adopted in 1986 and 1994. It was considered the main source for funding the EU's development program in Syria, and at the same time, it was the main regulator and capstone of cooperation between Syria and the EU until 1995 when negotiations developed to an Association Agreement (Council of the EU 2009, The Delegation of the EU to Syria 2016).

Since 1995, as a result of some external developments, a new generation of policies emerged into individual Association Agreements (AA) between the EU and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. The purpose of AA was an economic integration among MENA countries and EU. Bilateral agreements between the EU and MENA countries were all successfully signed, except for Syria. The negotiations process between Syria and the EU began in 1998, and an agreement was approved on a technical level by 2003. In 2005, a European Parliament delegation was sent to Syria where they declared the agreement signing could be expected by November of 2005. However, no ratification happened and the agreement has been used as a bargaining chip since then (Dorstal 2009).

The Syrian government desperately tried for years to negotiate an association agreement with the EU for it being the largest and most important trade partner for Syria. The failure for signing the agreement was referred to as the Syrian regime's inability to meet the requirements mentioned in the agreement, such as good governance, democracy, and human rights, in addition to the issue of proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (Hinnebusch 2005). In 2007, the EU foreign ministry chief, Javier Solana, visited Damascus and highlighted that the agreement could be signed if the Syrian government stops the flow of weapons to Lebanon and lessens the tension between the government and opposition (Raphaeli 2007, Feldman 2007).

For the Syrian government, the AA ratification was concluded out of urgency, although the government was not ready to implement all required conditions. The main reason behind the Syrian ratification of the agreement was to counter the international hostility towards Syria and the isolation created by the US after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Other reasons behind the Syrian government's sped-up process for signing the AA were of economic nature. They wanted to control the rapidly increasing poverty and unemployment in the country. In addition, they wished to keep the private sector surviving as small firms were not able to employ even half of the job seekers every year, estimated between 150,000 and 200,000 people (Haddad 2005).

The failure to sign the ratification made the Syrian leadership change its strategy by turning towards developing stronger strategic and economic relations with Russia, Iran, and China. The result was obvious as the presence of Russian and Chinese oil companies emerged on the Syrian soil and trade with China has flourished (Hinnebusch 2005).

II. IV. Relationship with Lebanon

Syria and Lebanon, regionally, were a part of the Ottoman Empire. The civil conflicts in 1840 and 1861 were driven by

the sectarian structure of the society, and made the Ottoman Empire give Lebanon a distinct status; a special governance. After occupying the region, France divided it into four states and established a mandate on Mount Lebanon, which became known later as the State of Greater Lebanon. Lebanon independence came in 1943 and became the State of Lebanon, while Syria gained independence in 1946 to become the Syrian Arab Republic. The social ties between the two countries were close, and people were considered as one in two separate entities. Syria and Lebanon were often recognized as twin countries. However, on the political level, the relationships were not that well all the time. It worsened until it reached the point of closing the borders between the two countries (Shihabi 2008).

During the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, many Palestinian guerilla fighters entered Lebanon and started conducting military trainings in the refugee camps, and the Southern part of Lebanon became a base for attacks on Israel. In 1970, Lebanon faced another influx of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters who were forced to leave Jordan. The tension in the country increased and clashes between the Lebanese army and PLO guerillas intensified. The clashes escalated to a war by 1975, dividing the country to a Christian "status quo coalition" and a Muslim-PLO "revisionist coalition"(Mohti 2010: 26-28, Irani 2008).

The main reason for the Syrian intervention in Lebanon was for peacemaking between the Christian and Muslim parties that were fighting with each other. The Syrian intervention in Lebanon happened in three main stages. The first occurred in 1976, after a year of civil war in Lebanon. The second stage of intervention came in February 1987, when Syrian troops had to move out from Lebanon due to the Israel invasion into Lebanon. The last stage followed in 1990 with more than 25,000 Syrian troops storming the Christian East Beirut, as East Beirut was under the control of General Michel Aoun at the time. It ended with the triumph of the Syrian troops, which took full control of East Beirut while general Michel Aoun fled to the French embassy seeking asylum.

Lebanon was a vital interest for the Syrian president that time, Hafez al-Assad. Speaking of the Syrian dominance in Lebanon, Haddad (2011) stated that Syria had hegemony over Lebanon. There were more than one million Syrian labor workers in Lebanon. Employment in Lebanon was the main contributor for the reduction of unemployment in Syria. Rebuilding Lebanon after the civil war meant a good opportunity for prosperity and growth for the economy in Syria. Under the pressure of Syrian regime, transportation and export of goods from Lebanon faced many barriers and difficulties, resulting the blockade of Lebanese agricultural products to reach anywhere in the Arab world. While at the same time, Lebanon was not allowed to impose taxes or tariffs on the incoming Syrian products. This eventually led to the bankruptcy of Lebanese farmers. It was also the main cause for agricultural depression in Lebanon.

Domination and exploitation did not stop there. Syria took full advantage of the rich water resources in Lebanon. Lebanon's River Assi, which flows from Lebanon to Syria, was under full control of the Syrian government while the Lebanese were not allowed to do any development projects on the river. The Syrian government wanted to keep the stream untouched so it could be fully utilized in the Syrian land. It also interfered with the privatization of public sectors via the support of few Lebanese politicians and parliament members who blocked any privatization attempt. Any successful privatization done by the Lebanese was treated as a threat that could damage business for Syrians. In the long run, it is estimated that the Syrian regime inflicted damages that cost Lebanon around $30 billion over the thirty years of its presence there (Haddad 2011). The Syrian government was indirectly ruling Lebanon through the Lebanese politicians who were actively and openly taking shelter at the Syrian government (Mordechai 2000).

Many Syrian companies were deeply involved in the Lebanese business scene. They were constructing roads and

buildings, and having main stakes in supplying cement and electricity to Lebanon. There were many reports complaining about the Syrian army and secret police racketing merchants, especially when the trade was related to vegetables, cigarettes, and clothing. On the other hand, Lebanon was the main source for many goods in the Syrian market. The industrial sector in Syria was fully dependent on smuggled goods in order to keep production going on (Kanovsky 1997).

Gambill (2011) claimed that the reason for Syria to keep the status quo in Lebanon was mainly economic, beside ideological and strategic motives. Keeping the presence of workers in Lebanon had many benefits for the Syrian government. Besides being a solution for the increasing unemployment in Syria, the total of remittances from Syrian workers in Lebanon reached around 40 percent, and was considered the second biggest income for Syria, right after oil. With the presence of many Syrian workers in Lebanon, it was easy for the Syrian intelligence to work undercover, and by using its political control over Lebanon, Syria pressured the Lebanese government to restrain the entry of non-Syrian workers into Lebanon. The Syrian workers were spared from paying taxes and work permit fees, while Lebanese workers were not. It is estimated that Lebanon's loss in tax and permit fees were hundreds of millions of dollars. Such strategy did not only save Syrian workers from facing competition in the Lebanese market, but also gave an opportunity for Syrian customs to racket trafficking smugglers, charging over $1,500 per head to smuggle workers from other Arab countries into Lebanon (Gambill 2001).

The financial sectors in Syria and Lebanon were firmly integrated. For Syrian businessmen, the Lebanese banks were a financial safe haven, as they did not need to worry about paying taxes on their deposits. Among the important shareholders of the Lebanese banks, many were from the Syrian elite. As mentioned earlier, the US sanctions on Syria had a huge impact on the financial sector, but the Lebanese banks gave the Syrian businessmen a chance to avoid those sanctions (Yacoubian 2006). Besides, the Syrian government saw that their presence in Lebanon could be used as a strategic leverage in negotiations with Israel to return the Golan Heights back to Syria (Kanovsky 1997). This paper agrees with Ghadbian's conclusion that the Syrian government's initial intention to be in Lebanon was to ensure security in the area. However, later, the economic interest prevailed over the security one and replaced it completely (Ghadbian 2001).

The Escalation of the Uprising in Syria in 2011-2012

III. I. Introduction

The analysis the uprising in Syria is presented over three major axes that incited violence and made it rapidly spread. Each section will analyze one side of the escalation of the uprising and the regime manipulative role in it. The first section addresses the initial point of the uprising in the city of Dar'a where everything started and spread to other cities in Syria, and the starting point of the escalation of the uprising as well. The second follows on the role of the regime's paramilitary forces, Shabiha. The last part illustrates the relevance of the extremists' and militants' release from prison in undermining the peaceful protests and turning them into violence. The overall goal of this part of the paper is to reflect on how peaceful protests for reforms in Syria twirled into a violent and chaotic civil war.

III. II. Dar'a Case: Reconstruction

This section explores the dynamics of the uprising in detail and investigates how the regime manipulated the incidents

which later came to be considered the climax in developing the situation on the ground from being peaceful demonstrations to direct clashes and violent conflict. Civil protests in Syria started by few young men using social media for organizing pro-reform, anti-governmental protests on February 4 (Flock 2011). The protests slowly emerged in different places and times; in the city of Hasakah on January 26th and February 28th (Iddon 2012, Khatib and Lust 2014, WordPress 2012), followed by spontaneous and serious protest triggered by an incident in Damascus on February 17th where the Minister of Interior himself with a few high officials came to the scene to mitigate the people's anger promising full investigation of the police brutality (Black 2011, Iddon 2012, Khatib and Lust 2014, Syrianon 2011).

The situation in Syria started to become more fragile and instable. However, it is important to highlight that the protestors' demands were focused on reforms, freedom, and ending of the emergency law, and the humiliating and repressive measures inflected by security forces. The government response had been cautious so far, suppressing the protests without the use of lethal force.

The next incident took place in the Southern border city of Dar'a. Its significance stems from the fact that it witnessed a change in the regime strategy dealing with protests. Although many considered the way the regime acted as mismanagement of the crisis after losing its patience with non-violent protesters (Darwisheh 2013, Holiday 2011, Kilcullen 2013), the following analysis of the Dar'a uprising intends to prove that the regime had intentionally adopted provocation as a style in dealing with protesters to cause the shift from peaceful protests to violent conflict. Few scholars agree with this research stance as well (Heydeman 2013, Dibo 2014).

Dar'a is a small agricultural city in the southwestern part of Syria, famous in the country for being the breadbasket for Damascus. The importance of the city also appears, as it is a border city, in being a transit point for commercial trafficking and smuggling between three counties; Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The majority of its population is Sunni Arabs with small minorities of Christians, Druze, and Shi'a. The structure of the society in Dar'a is tribal, and the major tribes there are al-Zoubi, al-Hariri, al-Na'ime, and al-Rifai (Heras 2014).

The sense for solidarity inside tribal societies is very strong. They do not hesitate to defend each other regardless of any past grievances or hostilities among them (al-Abd 2013). Family loyalty and honor are very important in tribal communities as well. According to Oxford Professor Dawn Chatty, the elementary tribal feature is "kinship ties and charismatic leadership within [the] extended family are still extremely important for these communities" (Lund 2015).

After Hafez al-Assad, the father, came to power, he showed an "unusual degree of flexibility in his policies towards tribes," while tribalism in the pre-Assad era was considered as "one of the major ills" in the Syrian society (Dukhan 2012: 6). Such strategy enhanced Assad's power and broadened his base of support. Hafez al-Assad asked for the tribes' assistance during the Hama conflict and to counter-balance the Kurdish population in the northeast part of Syria. The relations between tribes and the regime in Syria were described as those of "patronage and clientelism." Tribal chiefs, Mashayikh, were pledging loyalty to the president, promising security and stability in their areas. In return, the regime would provide them with financial aid, light arms and ammunition, vehicles, and some government benefits (Dukhan 2012: 14).

Moving to the story construction of the turning point towards the escalation of Syria's uprising, it is essential to recount details of the story as those details show the intricate dynamics of the escalation.

On March 6th, fifteen young boys, aged between 10 and 15, were arrested and taken into custody in Dar'a for writing the famous anti-regime slogan that became wide spread during the Arab spring, "al-Shaab Yoreed Esqat el nizam!", meaning people want to overthrow the regime (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018, Gifkins 2012, Khatib and Lust 2014). They were

detained by the Political Security Service, which was under the control of General Atef Najeeb, a close cousin of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. They were brutally beaten and tortured for days. The detained young boys were from large famous families in Dar'a; the Baiazids, the Gawabras, the Masalmas, and the Zoubis (Macleod 2011, Commins and Lesch 2014: 355).

The tribes sent a delegation of their leaders to meet with the head of the Political Security Service, General Atef Najeeb, to ask for the release of the young boys from detention. As a tribal tradition, the delegation took their headbands off (*the kuffiyyah and ~aqal*), leaving them on the table, which meant that they would not leave until the situation is resolved. In tribal societies, headbands symbolize manhood and chivalry, and for the delegation to exhibit that tribal gesture, they expected their request to be taken seriously and to have a cooperative response. However, the head of Political Security Service responded disrespectfully and in a very provocative manner he threw the headbands in the dustbin. Upon receiving such provocation, the "networks of tribesman from al-Zu'bi and al-Masalmah tribes" organized a huge demonstration (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018, Dukhan 2012: 7-8).

On March 18th, after Friday prayer in the main Omari Mosque in Dar'a, the families of the young detained boys gathered and went with local religious leaders to the house of the city's mayor, Faisal Kalthoum, asking for the release of their children. The security forces used water cannons and tear gas to disperse the crowds, and eventually they opened live fire killing at least four (Olimat 2013: 146-147, Comins and Lesch 2014).

Two days after the bloody incident, the regime sent a delegation to meet the protestors reaching an agreement to release the detained kids. The kids were released full of bruises and injuries indicating the brutal torture they received in prison. This inflamed anti-government feelings and contributed in intensifying the protests. Protesters in Dar'a took on the Omari mosque as a central point for gathering. Two days after releasing the kids, regime forces assaulted the mosque killing and wounding many people (Comins and Lesch 2014: 355).

The dynamics of the events in Dar'a and the brutality of the regime forces made the Human Rights Watch (HRW) conduct research about the Dar'a happenings. The research was issued on June 2011 under the title "We've Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Forces" (Human Rights Watch 2011). According to HRW's detailed investigation, the regime forces were systematically using lethal weapons against peaceful protesters, and, as claimed by witnesses, they were ordered to shoot or kill. While the regime kept sending delegations promising investigations into the matter, its forces increased their use of brutality on the ground. The government was manipulating the media by denying any role for security forces in the violence in Dar'a, putting all the blame on protesters describing them as "instigators," "foreign elements," and "armed gangs." The Syrian National News Agency (SANA) was used to report only the numbers and names of dead members on the security force side, repeatedly and firmly claiming that "armed gangs" or "terrorists" killed them (SANA, cited by HRW 2011). As protests became bigger, the response of the regime forces became even more brutal, leading to the outbreak of more protests and to violent confrontation. Dar'a residents resorted to violence only after security forces started massive lethal attacks, at the end of March. They burnt several governmental buildings, the mayor's house and the political security building. Several security force members were killed during the confrontations (Human Rights Watch 2011).

Due to the tribal nature of the residents of Dar'a, it was a not surprise that they would seek vengeance against the perpetrators of the crimes against the tribe. The idea of vengeance here does not indicate the casual meaning of seeking revenge against a perpetrator; it is associated with the concept of "Intiqaam" which refers to a bigger sense of honor and

chivalry where tribe members try to honor their name by seeking "intiqam" if anyone of their tribe members, the kids in the incident above, was assaulted (Dukhan 2012: 9).

The escalation of the uprising in Dar'a was mentioned in the UN report of "Situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic" A/C.3/69/L.31. Parts of this report state: "… civilian protests erupted in Dar'a in March 2011, and noting that the excessive and violent oppression of civilian protests by the Syrian authorities, which later escalated to the direct shelling of civilian population areas, fueled the escalation of armed violence and extremist groups … Expressing grave concern at the disproportionate use of force by the Syrian authorities against civilians, which has caused immense human suffering and fomented the spread of extremism and extremist groups" (United Nations 2014). The Syrian regime persistently used its security system to provoke the peaceful protesters in the Syrian provinces, which fell into the game by gradually seeking violence as a response to the oppressive measures of the regime (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018, Heydemann 2013).

III. Shabiha

The term 'Shabiha' started to be used during the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon, in the 1970s. Although the word is Arabic, it is often not understood outside of Syria. The literal meaning of the word is 'ghosts.' It is related to the nature of the Shabiha who were acting out of sight, lawless, and being in the shadow (Background Report NATO 2016, al-Haj Salih 2012). Such perception was associated with the smuggling activities from Lebanon to Syria.

Tracking the historical origins of Shabiha paramilitary led to the Assad family (Holliday 2013). Hafez al-Assad was largely using the paramilitary forces in order to enforce or maintain his political power in the country. 'Shabiha paramilitary' was an adopted strategy in countering the uprising of Muslim Brotherhood during the 1980s, when Hafez al-Assad armed a certain number of members of the Ba'ath Party in order to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood members (The Carter Center 2013). It is important to note that the regime did not only tolerate the existence of Shabiha, it had benefited a lot from the smuggling that were operated and fully controlled by Shabiha. Among the main smugglers were the nephews of Hafez al-Assad, Fawaz and Mudhir al-Assad (Background Report NATO 2016).

In 2011, a Shabiha group, reportedly, drove through the city of Latakia in cars fully armed with machine guns and started shooting protesters. After that, they were also said to have taken roof top sniping positions and killed at least 21 people (Blomfield 2011). Shabiha is notorious for the forceful recruiting of able-bodied men and using armed men to carry out their activities. These recruits are said to be ill-treated and forcefully manipulated by their bosses to carry out mass murders (Alexander and Sherlock 2012).

Shabiha committed numerous crimes and mass atrocities. Besides being involved in the mass forced displacement of people, they have been responsible for targeting Sunni villages across Syria and committing massacres of men, women, and children. Many of the Sunni villages, which witnessed those massacres, were in the neighborhood of Alawite and Shi'a villages. Due to those mass atrocities and bloody massacres which were a "cause" and "effect" of the "sectarian polarization," diverse communities composed of Sunni, Alawites, and other minorities, started to divide along sectarian lines to a degree that made many move their residence to live next to those who belong to the same sect (Holliday 2013: 22-23).

Shabiha and regime forces committed a brutal massacre in the opposition city of Houla on May 25th, 2012, killing around one hundred people. Most victims were killed in cold-blood-style executions by guns and knives, and most of them were women and children. Survivors and witnesses were firm in identifying Shabiha to be the perpetrators, as Shabiha did

not care to hide their Alawite dialect and identity, and arrogantly boasted about who they are and where they are from. The regime manipulation of media in this case too, blaming the opposition for the atrocity in Houla, only made people more furious and it contributed to the increase of sectarian tensions in the country and especially in that region (Chulov and Mahmood 2012, Mikaberidze 2013: 267, Adams 2015). As a consequence, that cruel brutality at Houla and Homs has "fully militarized the opposition" and marginalized nonviolent-resistance oriented groups like the Local Coordination Commitees (LCC) (Al-Saleh and White 2013: 7).

The UN condemned the act perpetrated by the Shabiha as supported by the Syrian government. It came in the Human Rights Council of the UN General Assembly, and stated the following in report No. A/HRC/21/50, on August 6th, 2012:

"The commission found reasonable grounds to believe that government forces and the Shabiha had committed crimes against humanity of … torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property. The commission found that Government forces and Shabiha members were responsible for the killings in Houla."

It is crucial to stress that the central role played by this group in the Syrian civil war was for the government to create fear in the minds of locals and also instigate reactions from citizens. The Syrian regime used Shabiha as a special tool to "intimidate, beat, and detain protestors" (Starr 2012). The Syrian regime's decision to allow brutal bloody violence and massacres to be perpetrated by Shabiha was to provoke reactions from Sunnis who were encouraged to fight through Wahabis' sectarian propaganda (Achcar 2012). Rightfully, they earned the description stated by Christopher Philips as the "regime's *agent provocateurs*" (Phillips 2013: 24).

This paper concedes with the conclusion of Goldsmith (2015) that the massacres, brutal beatings, detainments, and humiliations of protesters by the regime's paramilitary forces, Shabiha, was more than the thought of just spreading fear and prohibiting protesters from demonstrating. According to Goldsmith, one of the main duties and purposes of the Shabiha's actions were to "provoke the violent reactions" from the peaceful protesters who kept patient without responding to the provocation for several months in 2011. The spread of peaceful protests was a much bigger threat for the regime than armed opposition (Goldsmith 2015: 204).

IV. Releasing extremists from prison

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2012, the Syrian government refused to meet or negotiate with rebels. The war involved several factions including supporters of the Syrian government, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Salafi Jihadist group, and the Alliance of Sunni Arab rebel groups (Flock 2012, Goldsmith 2015, Black 2016).

There had been a huge discrepancy between the regime's actions and what Assad said in his speeches since the start of the conflict in Syria. On one hand, Bashar al-Assad placed the blame for the bloody conflict in Syria on "enemies," saying that the society in Syria failed not only morally, but on both social and national levels. That happened because Syrians were hosting a "social Incubator" for millions of local Syrian terrorists (AFP 2013, al-Yazid al-Umawi 2014). On the other hand, the Syrian regime released many militant extremists from prisons and those have played a critical role in derailing the peaceful protests goal in Syria. Assad released 260 prisoners from Sednaya prisons, 14 of whom were Kurds. One of the

released prisoners was a top human rights lawyer, Haitham al-Maleh.

Initially, the Sednaya prison served as home for many Islamists and Jihadists who were nurtured, raised, and dispatched to Iraq during the American invasion. When the civil war erupted in Syria, the regime released many of those Islamists and Jihadists from prison, while on the other hand detaining and arresting moderate opposition activists. All this happened before the opposition of Assad's rule became more committed. By setting the radical Islamists free, there was a high chance that they would fight each other, thus Assad would gain the advantage over the divided protests and bring the country back under control. The rise of hardcore extremist groups benefited the regime by presenting itself as secular oriented fighting jihadi extremists (Laub 2019).

There is also an argument that the majority of those in ISIS and other militant group leadership were among the prisoners released from jail by Bashar al-Assad (Cordall 2014). According to al-Awdat (2015), the militarization of the peaceful revolution started when Zahran Alloush was released from prison. Soon after his release, Alloush become a military leader for the Islamic political military front, later known as Jaysh al-Islam, the 'Army of Islam,' with around sixty thousand fighters. Afterwards, the Syrian regime attacked the city of Douma claiming that it was fighting terrorists (al-Awdat 2015). Sednaya prison was considered a "breeding ground" for militant extremists (Orton 2014).

The conditions of detainment for most were horrible. Most of imprisoned became Salafists and extremists in prison. Even after their release, the suffering they saw in prison had pitted them against Assad's regime (Cordal 2014). According to Achcar (2016), from the beginning of the uprising, the regime was calling the protestors "terrorists," but it faced the problem of proving such allegations. In order to support the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of manipulating the media with the "Takfiri Jihadist armed conspiracy," from the start of the uprising, the regime had to promote the growth of jihadists inside the opposition lines. The adopted strategy released a significant number of hardcore militants. Eventually, several released prisoners became the main leaders of different Jihadist military groups in Syria (Laub 2019, Achcar 2016, Chulov 2015).

In his research on the cooperation between target governments and terrorists, in the case of Syria, Michael Becker tackled the support and cooperation with extremists from the beginning of the uprising. Becker stated that "Even as the regime decried "terrorist" elements among the opposition, Assad ordered the release of scores of known Sunni jihadist... it behoves Assad, both domestically and internationally, to portray the opposition as composed "terrorists"…." (Becker 2015: 96). The regime was aware of the weakness of Syrian society and jeopardy of extremists' intentions and the release of such intended to manipulate the events of the protest.

Conclusion

It is not unfamiliar for the Syrian regime to use manipulation of sectarianism to secure and maintain its control. It is rather one of the methods that the regime has depended on for decades (Wimmen 2016, Van Dam 2011, Philips 2015, Dibo 2014). Despite the gravity of damage and atrocities, the regime has proven that it is willing to salvage its own survival on the expense of the country and the people. As Fabrice Balanche (2018) said "Certainly, Assad has used all means necessary to stay in power, including tactics that exacerbate interfaith tensions, but neither he nor his father created this divisions - they only exploited the pre-existing vulnerabilities of Syrian society" (Balanche 2018: XI).
This paper highlighted the key factors before the uprising that affected the Syrian society and made it prone to protests demanding changes in the country. In order to comprehend and analyze the complexity of uprising in Syria, it is necessary to

examine the plethora of factors (internal and external), rather than focusing on one only. The aim of the paper was to provide a comprehensive analysis of the escalation of the peaceful protests and the way the regime manipulated the situation on the ground in order to maintain the status quo to stay in power. These key factors laid a fertile ground for making Syrians dare to raise their voices asking for changes in their country. This paper aspired to contribute a better understanding of the escalation that led to a civil war in Syria, and the circumstance the country was facing before the war.

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