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## The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad

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Annette Büchs

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## **The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad**

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks an explanation for the resilience of the Syrian authoritarian regime under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad. It will be argued that this resilience is to a relevant extent caused by the fact that the regime's "material" as well as "ideational" forms of power share a common element, if not an underlying principle. This generates their compatibility and congruency and thus produces a convergence of forces which manifests in the regime's ability to exceed the mere sum of its individual forms of power. It will be demonstrated that this common principle can be conceptualized as a "tacit pact" between unequal parties, with the weaker party under constant threat of exclusion and/or coercion in the event of noncompliance. It will be argued that inherent in the pact is a high level of ambiguity; this, paradoxically, renders it more effective but at the same time also more unstable as a tool of domination.

Keywords: authoritarianism, power of command, disciplinary power, hegemony, Middle East

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## Zusammenfassung

### **Die Widerstandsfähigkeit autoritärer Herrschaft in Syrien unter Hafez und Bashar Al-Asad**

Der vorliegende Beitrag versucht, eine Erklärung für die Widerstandsfähigkeit des syrischen Regimes unter Hafez und Bashar Al-Asad zu erarbeiten. Die hier vertretene These ist, dass sowohl die materiellen als auch die ideellen Arten von Macht des syrischen Regimes auf einem gemeinsamen Prinzip beruhen. Dieses bewirkt eine Konvergenz von Kräften, die zu der besonderen Widerstandsfähigkeit des syrischen Regimes führt. Dieses gemeinsame Prinzip soll hier als ein *tacit pact* konzeptionalisiert werden, der aus zwei ungleichen Parteien besteht und in dem die schwächere Partei unter der ständigen Androhung von Gewalt und dem Ausschluss aus dem Pakt im Falle seiner Nichteinhaltung steht. Dem *tacit pact* wohnt ein hohes Maß an Ambiguität inne, das ihn zu einem effektiveren, aber paradoxerweise auch instabilen Herrschaftsinstrument macht.

# **The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad**

**Annette Büchs**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Regime, State, and Power: Conceptualizing the Question of the Syrian Regime's Longevity
- 3 Corporatism: A Socio-historical Institutional Approach
- 4 The Concept of Cultural Hegemony and Its Limits: A Culturalist Approach
- 5 Conclusion

## **1 Introduction**

With Hafez Al-Asad's assumption of power in 1970, Syria, which had until then been the most coup-ridden state in the Arab World, saw a major change. Hafez Al-Asad's regime managed to retain its grip over the Syrian state and people for a period of over 30 years. It survived a three-year period of severe social unrest, a serious economic crisis, and the attempted challenge of Asad's position by his brother Rif'at; it also managed to secure the succession of Hafez Al-Asad by his son Bashar. This striking resilience of the Syrian regime under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad is the puzzle this paper attempts to explain.

The Syrian case, however, is by no means utterly unique. It can instead be understood as a variation of a specific form of rule that seems to be dominant in the Middle East (Hinne-

busch 2002: 1). The Syrian case thus implies and can shed light on broader comparative questions such as authoritarianism and compliance, and certainly not only within the confines of the Middle East (Wedeen 1999: 5).

Both the broader comparative issues and those specific to Syria have most commonly been approached with a focus on coups, institutions of repression, or the primordial. However, since all these approaches contain major flaws, their analytical usefulness for this paper is limited. The studies that focus on coups<sup>1</sup> may tell us something about how regimes came to power, but they do not look at how they function thereafter (Linz 1975). Furthermore, many such studies have tended to view the military as a modernizer, a notion which has been largely disproved by the relevant cases, including Syria (Picard 1988). While a certain kind of structural institutionalism seeks an answer in the repressive institutions of the state (Linz 1975; Perlmutter 1981), and thus indeed looks at the functioning of authoritarian regimes, it tends towards structural explanations that fail to link the macrolevel to the microlevel (Migdal 2001: 241-247). Furthermore, the inadequacy of such approaches has been demonstrated by cases like Iran, which show that mere repression does not guarantee the survival of a regime (Heydemann 1999: 3). With regard to Syria, such, often functionalist, approaches have generated studies classifying the Syrian system of rule as, for example, a subtype of “modern military praetorianism” (Perlmutter 1981: 42) or as various other forms of “military rule.”<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, culturalist studies have focused on the primordial, and have most commonly depicted Syria as being under Alawi minority rule (Van Dam 1996). By focusing on the primordial, however, these studies have failed to account for the changes and dynamics within authoritarian regimes, and have tended to downplay the differences in authoritarian rule between the different Middle Eastern states. They have further not been able to study the issues at stake comparatively, and have thus contributed little to the broader comparative question of authoritarianism (Linz 1975).

This paper will therefore seek an explanation for the longevity of authoritarianism under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad that goes beyond these common approaches, which look for an answer in either repression or the primordial alone. The question of the Syrian authoritarian regime’s resilience will be conceptualized in a twofold manner. First, it will be argued that the regime should be studied through an analysis of the state—not, however, implying the equation of both concepts—as the regime *appropriates* the state as a means of gaining the obedience and compliance of the Syrian people (Perthes 2002; Perthes 1997; Hinnebusch 1990). In the case of Syria a clear-cut analytical distinction between regime and state is limited, as the regime has, to a considerable extent, transformed and created state institutions in its own image (Perthes 2002). Second, it will be argued that the issue of the state as a *means* of gaining obedience and conformity, that is, the issue of power, is intimately intertwined

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<sup>1</sup> This was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. See for example Be’eri 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Though this literature does not always necessarily refer specifically to Syria, Syria can be subsumed under the respective subgroups of “military rule.” One of many examples for this literature: Nordlinger 1977.

with the study of the state (Migdal 2001: 231). Thus, a specific conceptualization of the state implies a specific understanding of the forms of power it possesses. In the context of this paper, power will be the crux of the study of the state.

The state will be studied, as proposed by Joel Migdal, through a blending of a socio-historical institutionalist—namely, a corporatist—approach with a culturalist perspective (Migdal 2001: 250-257). The corporatist approach is given preference over structural-institutionalist approaches as it overcomes, to a certain extent, their failure to link the macrolevel with the microlevel (Migdal 2001; Kato 1996). Corporatism rethinks the assumption of state autonomy, which many structural institutionalists tend to subscribe to. It, alternatively, conceptualizes the state not as completely separate from society but instead as being in an interactive, mutually transformative relationship with it, thus blurring the line between—and limiting the analytical usefulness of—both concepts (Ayubi 1995; O'Donnell 1979; Mitchell 1991). This relationship is depicted as being of a certain nature: evolving around punitive and material inducements. Through the latter, societal groups are incorporated by the state on the basis of individuals' utility-maximization calculations (Perthes 1997). Thus, as the macrolevel and the microlevel are being linked through the concept of rational choice, power is no longer understood merely as the ability to employ punitive inducements, as the structural institutionalists might have it, but also as the ability to employ material ones (Wedeen 1999: 5).

However, this specific linking of the macrolevel and the microlevel, so it will be argued, is incomplete and thus insufficiently tackles the question of the longevity of Syria's authoritarian regime. The concept of rational choice has been criticized for the exceeding simplicity of its rationality assumption, and alternatives such as the broader concept of "bounded rationality" (Kato 1996: 573) have been put forward (Kato 1996: 573-574). In a somewhat similar manner, David Laitin has argued that interest-maximization calculations can only be accounted for if the realm of the cultural is incorporated into analysis. Otherwise, so he argues, it is impossible to account for an individual's preferences (Laitin 1986: 181). The macro- and microlevel are thus to be linked through the culturalist perspective as well. This implies the generation of another form of power: "ideational" (Wedeen 1999: 5) power, consisting of the state's ability to manipulate "images of power and authority"<sup>3</sup> and exploit "popular mentalities of subordination."<sup>4</sup> "Ideational" power is conventionally understood as generating hegemonic "belief" in the Gramscian sense, but the Syrian case can hardly be said to do so; therefore, the analysis of Syria's "ideational" power will imply a certain rethinking of broader comparative concepts such as hegemony and compliance (Wedeen 1999: 5).

In looking at the outlined forms of power—that is, "material" forms, consisting of the regime's ability to employ "punitive and material inducements" (Wedeen 1999: 5), as well as "ideational" (Wedeen 1999: 5) forms, consisting of the regime's ability to manipulate "im-

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson as quoted in Migdal 2001: 240.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



ages of power and authority” and “popular mentalities of subordination”—this essay will attempt an explanation of the longevity of authoritarian rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad. The approach chosen here goes beyond the common structural-institutionalist or culturalist explanations in so far as it, first, adds the power to employ material inducements to the power to employ punitive ones (Perthes 1997); second, combines those “material” forms of power with “ideational” ones, which have generally been studied in isolation from each other (Migdal 2001: 232); third, rethinks conventional conceptualizations of “ideational” power; and finally, considers the relationship and interactions between the various forms of power (Mitchell 1990).

Informed by this theoretical approach, the paper will argue that the resilience of Syrian authoritarian rule under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad is, to a certain extent, caused by an underlying principle, that is, that of a “tacit pact,”<sup>5</sup> common to the various forms of power (Ayubi 1995; Wedeen 1999; Al-Khalil 1991). This common principle produces the compatibility and congruency of these forms of power and thus generates the convergence of their forces, which results in the regime’s ability to exceed the mere sum of its individual forms of power. The “tacit pact” itself can be conceptualized as consisting of unequal parties, with the conformity of the weaker party secured through the constant threat of exclusion and/or coercion in the case of noncompliance (Ayubi 1995; Khalil 1991). The high level of ambiguity inherent in the pact renders it more effective but at the same time also more unstable—paradoxically—as a tool of domination. As the “tacit pact” and, thus, the individual forms of power remain *highly ambiguous* forms of domination, the longevity of authoritarian rule in Syria can hardly be equated with its stability (Ayubi 1995). It will be further argued that the concept of the “tacit pact” cuts through the dichotomous conceptualization of power as being either “material” or “ideational” (Mitchell 1990). Thus, these two categories as used in this study are not to be understood as being mutually exclusive. It is exactly this gray area of overlap that generates the previously mentioned convergence of forces; this, in turn, increases regime power beyond the mere sum of the individual forms of power it possessed in the first place.

The following section will argue for the conceptualization of the question of the regime’s longevity as a study of the state and its implied forms of power. Section 3 will argue for a socio-historical institutionalist, namely, a corporatist, approach, and for an analysis of the implied “material” forms of power. It will demonstrate that the regime’s “material” forms of power are based on the principle of a “tacit pact.” Section 4 will argue for a blending of the corporatist and culturalist perspectives and an analysis of the implied forms of “ideational” power through a challenged concept of hegemony. It will demonstrate that the principle of the “tacit pact” is underlies the regime’s “ideational” forms of power. The final section will highlight and draw together the findings of sections 3 and 4.

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<sup>5</sup> This expression is borrowed from Nazih Ayubi, though he refers to a “tacit political pact.” Ayubi 1995: 246.

## 2 Regime, State, and Power: Conceptualizing the Question of the Syrian Regime's Longevity

This section will propose a specific theoretical conceptualization of the authoritarian regime's resilience under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad. It will argue in favor of a twofold approach which seeks, first, to study the regime through the study of the state and, second, to access, through the study of the state, the "power" the regime possesses and exerts through the state.

The concept of the regime is distinct from that of the state. While regime refers broadly to an "organized system of rule" (Calhoun 2002), a specific "dispensation of power" (Tripp 1989) and patterns of government within a state, the concept of the state itself is broader. It can be largely understood as a certain "form of organization of power" (Tripp 1989: 355), and more specifically<sup>6</sup> as "a set of institutions that possesses a monopoly on rule-making and the legitimate use of force within a bounded territory."<sup>7</sup> Though, accordingly, the concepts of regime and state cannot be equated, the regime can nevertheless, in the specific case of Syria, be studied *through* the study of the state, as it, like authoritarian regimes in general,<sup>8</sup> can be understood as having "appropriated" the state, using it as the basis and vehicle through which it achieves conformity and obedience (Tripp 1989: 355). With regard to Syria, this "appropriation" has gone so far that the regime has transformed and created state institutions in its own image; it has done this to such an extent that a clear-cut distinction between the two concepts is made problematic (Perthes 1997). Nevertheless, the proposed study of the regime *through* the study of the state is not intended to abolish the general conceptual distinction between the two concepts but rather derives from the regime's appropriation of the state.

One of the key questions in the study of the state is the issue of conformity and obedience (Migdal 2001). In other words, the theme of power is central to the study of the state, as power, though it remains a rather vague concept (Luke 1986), can be said to—even in such "opposed" understandings of power as Weber's "power of command" (Weber as quoted in Migdal 1988: 235) and Foucault's "disciplinary power" (Mitchell 1991: 93)—largely evolve around the issue of obedience and conformity. As, accordingly, the study of the state is closely intertwined with the study of power, a specific conceptualization of the state entails a specific conceptualization of power (Wedeen 1999: 5). The study of the regime through the state can then provide access to the power of the regime in so far as the Syrian regime, having appropriated the state, is exerting its power through and on the basis of that state.

This section has argued for a twofold conceptualization of the question of the Syrian regime's resilience. Firstly, it has argued for a study of the regime through the study of the state; this approach is not based on a conceptual equation of these two concepts but rather on the notion

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<sup>6</sup> For debates on the Weberian notion of power see Mitchell 1991 and Migdal 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Calhoun 2002. This definition relies on Weber's definition of the state, which, though it is debated, has been of great influence.

<sup>8</sup> A definition of authoritarianism: a regime "distinguished by a high degree of state power and discretion, and, most often, the absence of procedures for popular consensus or for guarding individual rights." Calhoun 2002.

that the Syrian state is appropriated by the regime. Secondly, it has been argued that the state can be a “key to understanding obedience and conformity” (Migdal 2001: 231). It can thus shed light on the power that the regime is exerting through it (see Scheme 1).

**Scheme 1: Structural Institutionalism versus Process-oriented Socio-historical Institutionalism**

	<b>Structural institutionalism</b>	<b>Process-oriented socio-historical institutionalism</b>
<b>Macro- and microlevel</b>	No link between macro- and microlevel	Macro- and microlevel linked through historical context and the concept of rational choice
<b>State autonomy</b>	State’s autonomy from society is assumed	State is not autonomous, instead state and society are understood to be in a mutually transformative relationship with each other

Source: Author’s compilation.

### 3 Corporatism: A Socio-historical Institutional Approach

The question that arises now is *how* to study the state. The proposed approach will be two-fold, the first aspect being addressed in this section, the second being dealt with in Section 4. This section will argue in favor of a socio-historical institutionalist, namely, a corporatist, approach, in order to study the state, and in so doing will analyze the Syrian regime’s “material” forms of power. It will also be argued that under these forms of power, obedience is realized through a “tacit pact.”

#### 3.1 Theoretical Context: A Brief Critique of Structural-institutionalist Literature on the Authoritarian State

This section will briefly critique a particular structural-institutionalist approach, represented here by two of its more influential studies, one by Amos Perlmutter and the other by Juan Linz (Winckler 1982).

In his analysis of authoritarianism, Perlmutter blends an institutionalist with a functionalist approach. This results, first, in a heavy tendency towards structuralism and thus the failure to link the macrolevel to the microlevel and, second, in the touting of state autonomy (Migdal 2001: 241). The flaws of both the concept of state autonomy and heavy structuralism will be discussed in depth in the next section. For now it is sufficient to note that the approach outlined leads Perlmutter to an explanation of authoritarianism that centers on the regime’s ability to “organize successfully the means of coercion” (Tripp 1989: 355). More precisely, Perlmutter depicts authoritarianism as a form of rule that is exerted through a “monopoly of

the ‘means of organization’<sup>9</sup>; erected on a “varying mix of institutions”<sup>10</sup>; and preserved through the “variety, complexity, [...] adaptability”<sup>11</sup> and strengthening of these institutions. “Institutions, not ideologies, differentiate politics” (Winckler 1982: 746), and thus, organized repression is the sole explanation for the resilience of authoritarianism; the microperspective is largely ignored. Accordingly, Perlmutter classifies the Syrian case as a specific type of military rule: “oligarchic modern military praetorianism” (Perlmutter 1982: 42). However, as mentioned before, cases like Iran have clearly demonstrated the inadequacy of those studies focusing solely on repression.<sup>12</sup>

Such structural-institutionalist approaches have been further criticized for failing to define authoritarianism in terms of its own traits. Jill Crystall has argued that Linz’s understanding of authoritarianism<sup>13</sup> as a system with “limited, not responsible pluralism [...] and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits, but actually quite predictable ones”<sup>14</sup> defines it in terms of what it is *not*, namely, democracy, rather than in naming its own authentic traits (Crystall 1994: 267).

This section has offered the following criticisms. First, with regard to the study of the state in general, the structural-institutionalist approach remains problematic as it fails to link macro- and microperspectives and as it touts state autonomy. Second, with regard to authoritarianism in particular, it fails to explain the resilience of authoritarian regimes, and to define authoritarianism in terms of authentic traits of its own.

### 3.2 Socio-historical Institutionalism and Its Preferability over Structural Institutionalism

This section will argue for the study of the state using a particular socio-historical institutionalist approach. It will be argued that this approach should be favored over structural institutionalism because it, first, links macro- and microperspectives and, second, overcomes the concept of state autonomy.

Structuralism’s assumption that “politics at the macrolevel is a function of or much influenced by large-scale social forces” (Lane and Ersson 1996: 123) results in several difficulties. It implies a certain determinism, in which the individual actor is completely bereft of agency (Migdal 2001: 241). Thus, whenever reality deviates from the designated path, the lack of microlevel analyses leaves us with no explanation for transitions from “one macro-state to another” (Levi 1987: 687). Joel Migdal argues in favor of an alternative approach to studying the state: a type of socio-historical institutionalism. This approach can be broadly under-

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<sup>9</sup> Perlmutter as quoted in Winckler 1982: 745.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Heydemann 1999: 3. He argues that some regimes have been overthrown even if they had the means of repression under control, he does not, though, specifically mention Iran.

<sup>13</sup> For a structural-institutionalist approach to authoritarianism that is quite similar to Perlmutter’s see Linz 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Linz as quoted in Chalmers 1979.

stood as attempting to move away from structuralism's determinism by assuming that "the particular configuration of institutions determine, modify, and order individual motives" (Migdal 2001: 246), and thus influence politics at large. Relevant in the context of this paper is this approach's analytical inclusion of the microlevel through, first, the concept of rational choice and, second, the cultural and historical. Rationality can be regarded as the "key to institutionalism, as individual's choices are made within a socially formed context and [...] are understood by the interests that stand behind them" (Migdal 2001: 246). In contrast, culture is considered only to a limited extent, as the focus is less on symbols "than on the ordering of relations and the understanding of political institutions" (Migdal 2001: 246). This, however will be discussed further in Section 4.

As socio-historical institutionalism can be divided into two subgroups, those touting state autonomy and those criticizing it, it has to be made clear that this paper will follow Migdal's proposal of studying the state through the latter approach, that is, process-oriented socio-historical institutionalism.

The concept of state autonomy assumes that the state is a coherent entity, autonomous from societal forces (Migdal 2001: 241-246). Autonomy is understood to stem from the state's "originally subjective" (Mitchell 1991: 83) nature, and to result in its "authoritative intentions" (Mitchell 1991: 82). In short, the state is seen as a possessor of its own ideas, preferences, and plans. Timothy Mitchell severely criticizes the concept of state autonomy. First, he argues that the subjective nature of the state is being claimed but is not explained in theoretical terms (Mitchell 1991: 83). Second, he demonstrates, using the "Aramco Case," that the "institutional mechanisms of a modern political order are never confined within [...] the state."<sup>15</sup> At the heart of his alternative conceptualization lies the issue of the state-society border. He argues that Weberian notions of "power of command,"<sup>16</sup> which underlie the concept of state autonomy, need to be overcome. He argues instead for Foucault's notion of "disciplinary power" (Mitchell 1991: 93), which no longer understands power as something external, stemming from one entity and being applied to another entity, but as the internalization of relations of power by individuals (Mitchell 1991: 93). These internalizations, so he argues, produce a "metaphysical effect" (Mitchell 1991: 94), which generates a seemingly "novel form of external structures" (Mitchell 1991: 94): an autonomous state with solid borders. The state and its borders are thus a mere "metaphysical effect" (Mitchell 1991: 94). Though Mitchell's approach is helpful for rethinking state autonomy and state-society relations, its analytical usefulness remains limited. First, Foucault's concept of "disciplinary power" is hardly analytically applicable, as the deconstruction of power makes it impossible to analyze its location and assign it to the relationship it relates to. Second, the deconstruction of power leads Mitchell to the deconstruction of the concept of the state and its border with society, turning both, as Bendix has argued, into mere issues of "post modern seman-

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell 1991: 90. For further details on the "Aramco case" see Mitchell 2001: 98.

<sup>16</sup> Weber as quoted in Migdal 2001: 235.

tics" (Bendix 1992: 1009) and thus severely limiting their analytical usefulness. However, Bendix argues that a more important—and applicable—aspect of this border than the definition of its elusive shape is its constant contestation and the traffic across it. These aspects entail the mutual transformation of both state and society and thus limit the analytical usefulness of the concepts "society" and "state" (Bendix 1992). The state is thus limited but not *de*-limited. Bendix's argument coincides with Migdal's approach (Migdal 2001: 250-264), which understands the state no longer as autonomous and in full possession of authoritative power but as "an organization divided and limited in the sorts of obedience it can demand" (Migdal 2001: 264). It further regards the state's engagement with society as a key question and thus argues for a process-oriented approach that investigates "who is delineating, negotiating, and crossing that [state-society] boundary [and] for what purpose" (Bendix 1992: 1007). This section has argued in favor of a process-oriented socio-historical institutionalist approach by qualifying the concept of state autonomy and heavy structuralism.

### 3.3 The Concept of Corporatism

This section will briefly define a corporatist approach and will argue in favor of studying the state through it as it embodies the type of process-oriented socio-historical institutionalist perspective the previous section argued for.

In its understanding of corporatism the paper will rely mainly on the conceptualization by Guillermo O'Donnell.<sup>17</sup> O'Donnell argues that corporatism originates from an "exaggerated [economic] role of the state" (Ayubi 1995: 13), that is, *étatisme*, brought about by dilatory capitalist development and the attempt at capitalist transformation through state-led industrialization.<sup>18</sup> He depicts corporatism as referring to a "set of structures which link society with the state"<sup>19</sup> in a certain way, that is, in a "segmentary" (O'Donnell 1979: 47) and "bifrontal" (O'Donnell 1979: 47) fashion. Corporatism is "segmentary" in so far as the state uses coercion in relations with lower societal segments, and strategies of "inclusion" and "exclusion" in relations with dominant segments.<sup>20</sup> Inclusion refers to alliances with certain, for the

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<sup>17</sup> See O'Donnell 1979. Though O'Donnell refers here to a specific type of corporatism, i.e., the "bureaucratic-authoritarian" type, which remains problematic if applied to the case of Syria, as section 3.4.2 will argue, this paper will nevertheless use O'Donnell's conceptualization in a broad sense. In this manner it remains analytically useful, even if not completely applicable in the case of Syria.

<sup>18</sup> O'Donnell 1979: 48. For a more detailed account see Ayubi 2001: 31-36, 192. *Étatisme* leads to a hybrid class spectrum with feeble classes. Thus no dominant class is able to arise to form a power bloc and corporatism results.

<sup>19</sup> O'Donnell 1979: 47. Instead of characterizing state or society as a whole, as some studies have tended to do. See for example Wiarda 1997.

<sup>20</sup> O'Donnell 1979: 47. As the Syrian case does not comply fully with O'Donnell's bureaucratic authoritarianism, as section 3.4.2 will argue, one can say that lower segments refers to those segments that are currently excluded as well as the broad mass in general, so that a general ambience of fear is maintained. Dominant segments would then be those segments that are of strategic relevance for the state. These are not merely those groups that can be subsumed under "capital providers," but also, for example, the middle peasantry, as section 3.4.2 will argue.

state indispensable or useful, groups that are forged mainly through the distribution of economic rewards, which creates dependency and thus ties the incorporated group to the state (O'Donnell 1979: 48). These alliances are often realized through the incorporation of institutions, which has the triple function of "representation, mobilization and control" (Perthes 1997: 170). The inclusion of certain groups generally implies the exclusion of other groups, and thus a certain configuration of inclusionary-exclusionary arrangements evolves. This configuration, however, is not fixed but is constantly reconfigured by the state, generally in order to contain the growth of independent power centers (O'Donnell 1979). O'Donnell further understands corporatism as being "bifrontal," meaning that as the state politically subordinates groups or civil society organizations it is at the same time opened up to some degree to their interests.<sup>21</sup>

Corporatism is a useful analytical concept in the context of this paper, not only because it is a socio-historical institutionalist approach (Kato 1996: 559) but also because it is the specific process-oriented type the previous section argued for.<sup>22</sup> It is a socio-historical institutionalist approach in so far as the forging and maintenance of alliances coincides with its institutionalization in a set of structures and the latter's specific "patterns of incorporation" (Perthes 1997: 240-241).<sup>23</sup> Further, as these patterns are mainly established through the distribution of economic rewards, corporatism intimately intertwines its institutional analysis with the concept of rational choice, linking the macrolevel to the microlevel. Moreover, corporatism takes a process-oriented approach which overcomes the concept of state autonomy. It steps beyond the notion of the state as completely separate from society and instead conceptualizes it as a web of power deeply embedded within society and established through the inclusionary and exclusionary strategies of the state, which embody the state's transgression of its border with society (Ayubi 1995). Corporatism thus focuses on process, that is, the interactive, and—due to the concept's "bifrontal" nature—mutually transformative relationship of state and society, which blurs their dividing line and limits the analytical usefulness of their concepts (Migdal 2001: 250-264).

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<sup>21</sup> Those processes are termed "statizing" and "privatizing." See O'Donnell 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Though the concept of corporatism does not reject the idea of state –autonomy per se, its specific conceptualization in the context of this paper does.

<sup>23</sup> It is this institutionalization which makes corporatism an adequate concept, also in empirical terms, with regard to Syria: while, for example, the concept of "patrimonialism" has been put forward as an explanation for the longevity of the Syrian regime, the low level of institutionalization it refers to does not match the highly institutionalized Syrian system.

### 3.4 The Aspect of Power in Corporatism: “Material” Power

Section 2 argued that the puzzle of the resilience of the Syrian regime should be approached through a study of the state and that the crux of the study of the state should be the issue of power. It further stated that a specific understanding of the state entails a specific understanding of power. The corporatist approach adopted in this part of the study can be said to treat “politics as basically a matter of material interests” (Wedeen 1999: 5). Power in this instance is conceptualized as the regime’s ability to gain obedience through the employment of punitive inducements, that is, through its ability to successfully “construct institutions of enforcement and punishment” (Wedeen 1999: 5) and through the employment of material inducements stemming from its capability to control material resources.

The following two sections will thus look through a “corporatist lense” at both of these forms of the Syrian regime’s “material” power. Corporatism in this specific instance then allows us to step beyond the structural-institutionalist assumption that seeks to explain authoritarianism merely through its repressive capabilities.<sup>24</sup> It also allows us to step beyond definitions that describe authoritarianism through what it is *not*, that is, democracy (Crystall 1994: 267), as corporatism was arguably developed as a third way, distinct from Marxian class and pluralistic analyses.<sup>25</sup>

#### 3.4.1 Punitive Inducements

This section will argue that the Syrian regime, through its “successful organization of the means of coercion” (Tripp 1989: 355), has a relatively high ability to employ punitive inducements in order to gain obedience.

The Syrian regime has indeed successfully organized its “instruments” of repression. The security apparatus is of considerable size, comprising police, military forces, and *mukhabarat* (security services). The *mukhabarat* consists of several legally unchecked services conducting surveillance in an open rather than secretive fashion through a dense and ubiquitous net and pervading “all parts of society, including the bureaucracy, the party and the army” (Perthes 1997: 148), thereby creating a constant ambience of fear.<sup>26</sup> The security apparatus can further be seen as the regime’s most impeccable instrument of control. Though the relationship between regime and security apparatus is one of mutual dependency, the president “has repeatedly proved that he can strip any military and security strongman of his posi-

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<sup>24</sup> As, for example, Perlmutter’s account does.

<sup>25</sup> See Wiarda 1997. Such claims of a “third way,” have, however, been criticized. See for example O’Donnell 1979.

<sup>26</sup> The ideologization of and through the apparatus has involved the intensive personality cult around Hafez and Bashar al-Asad, which, however, has not produced a belief in it amongst the Syrian people but has instead—helped and “enforced” by the *mukhabarat* and other parts of the security apparatus—conditioned people’s behavior. See Ayubi 1995, Khalil 1991, Wedeen 1999. This aspect, however, will become relevant in Section 4. This section will look in depth at the reception of repression within the individual and the effects it has upon him/her.



tion" (Perthes 1997: 153), as was the case with Naji Jamil, Ali Haidar, and Rif'at Al-Asad. The regime has secured its indisputable control over the security apparatus, first, through the creation of dependency through the distribution of material incentives and, second, through effective "checks" that balance, curtail, and control the various forces. These two strategies are not mutually exclusive but rather often interdependent.<sup>27</sup>

Material incentives include employment, as the security apparatus employs around half of all state employees.<sup>28</sup> It provides career chances and certain privileges for its members. These include, for example, tax exemptions; higher wages than in other areas of the public sector; more entrepreneurial freedom (in the military-economic sector) than in the rest of the public sector; possible political influence and prestige (as many key political positions are held by officials of the security apparatus); and the opportunity for personal enrichment through illegal activities such as corruption, patronage, smuggling, etc.<sup>29</sup> This web of material privileges and dependency extends even to civilians, as knowing a member of the *mukhabarat* helps one to attain privileges and because there is a growing connection between the military-economic sector and the commercial bourgeoisie (Perthes 1997: 148-153).

"Checks" on the security apparatus to prevent the formation of independent power centers are applied in the following ways. First, forces *within* institutions are balanced, preventing the rise of strongmen. This is because illegal enrichment is tolerated only to a limited extent and such practices are at times curtailed, as, for example, hashish cultivation in the Beqaa Valley and cigarette smuggling were constrained in the early 1990s (Perthes 1997: 153). Second, a balancing of forces *between* institutions is employed: the various security services overlap in order to control each other as do the military, security services, and the police.<sup>30</sup> Third, the regime increases the coherency of and its grip over the security apparatus by underpinning it with an informal patronage network of "people of trust" (Tripp 2002-03: 26) in which every key official is directly dependent upon the president as he owes his position to his loyalty to him (Fürting 1994: 241). This section has argued that the Syrian regime has a relatively high ability to employ punitive inducements in order to gain obedience. The regime has, first, successfully organized its "instruments" of repression in a voluminous and all-pervading security apparatus and has, second, secured its control over that apparatus through the employment of dependency-creating material inducements and the employment of "checks" that balance, curtail, and control the various forces.

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<sup>27</sup> The following section will show that the state uses the same measures in the same manner towards civilian institutions.

<sup>28</sup> The military economic sector is included in this calculation.

<sup>29</sup> Examples were the smuggling of cigarettes and hashish cultivation in the Beqaa Valley. See Perthes 1997: 147 ff.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the *mukhabarat* is mostly part of the military and both recruit from one another.

### 3.4.2 *Material Inducements*

So far it has been argued that the corporatist strategy for avoiding the growth of alternative centers of power consists of the erection of a web of power consisting of constantly shifting coalitions. Further, it has been argued that these alliances are based on material inducements and on their institutionalization, the two of which often coincide and which are both measures of control for the state. This section will look at the ability of the Syrian regime to employ material inducements and institutionalize its coalitions in order to gain obedience and secure control over its allies. It will argue that the Syrian regime's capability to do so is relatively high. It will also make the point that regime consolidation can be roughly divided into three periods that largely coincided with three major coalitions, but that because these coalitions were not mutually exclusive they provided the Syrian regime with a particularly high ability to incorporate a broad spectrum of social groups. Accordingly, so it will be argued, the Syrian case does not follow O'Donnell's cycle of the inevitable transformation of populist authoritarianism into bureaucratic authoritarianism.

The first period, 1963–1970, saw a mainly populist alliance composed predominantly of peasants and workers. Peasants were won into the coalition primarily through radical land reforms, which expropriated land from the old oligarchy's large landowners and redistributed it to peasants and smaller landholders. Workers, understood here as the "wage-earning middle classes,"<sup>31</sup> were won into the coalition through employment in the expanding economic public sector as the regime worked towards the erection of a statist economy, which entailed the exclusion of the old commercial and industrial bourgeoisie.<sup>32</sup> Heydemann has argued that the Ba'th employed a particularly "hard brand of populism" (Heydemann 1999: 21), according to which—unlike "softer" versions, such as that in Egypt under Nasser—the Ba'th "was prepared to use the iron fist and risk class conflict to suppress powerful interest groups" (Heydemann 1999: 21). Thus, capitalists and landlords were severely marginalized. The Ba'th thereby radically inverted the severe urban-rural conflict that had arisen in the 1950s and thus enabled the regime to create new power through this re-stratification. It created a constituency, its rural base, based not only on material inducements but also on a certain degree of legitimacy. Thus, as material inducements receded later on, this constituency proved to be a rather stable pillar of the regime (Hinnebusch 1979; 1990; 1996). However, this legitimacy, of course, remained and remains limited: populist interests were subjected to harsh corporatist restructuring, incorporating the masses in mass organizations such as the party or the Peasant Union with the triple function of not only "representation, [but also, and most prominently,] mobilization and control" (Perthes 1997: 170).

The second period, from 1970 to the mid-1980s, saw a movement away from the radical exclusion of the old oligarchy of landlords and capitalists, and instead saw the incorporation

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<sup>31</sup> Perthes 1997: 106. Perthes uses this term in contrast to the self-employed middle classes. Perthes 1997: 101-109.

<sup>32</sup> See Heydemann and Hinnebusch 1990; 2002.

of a relatively broad and diverse spectrum of societal groups. This generous incorporation, and thus distribution of economic rewards, was made possible by the rather big flow of foreign, especially Arab, aid after 1973, as well as by the dramatic rise in oil prices, both of which can be seen as making Syria an “indirect rentier-state” (Hinnebusch 2002: 7). As the radical exclusion of the previously dominant classes was no longer pursued under Hafez Al-Asad, with a “limited” accommodation of parts of the old commercial and industrial bourgeoisie being sought instead, the early 1970s saw Hafez Al-Asad’s first *infitah*. This most notably created a new commercial bourgeoisie “fed” by the state’s exaggerated economic role and thus dependent on its control over resources and the market. The main ally in the new coalition following Asad’s assumption of power, however, was the “wage-earning middle classes,” together with, though to a lesser extent, the urban working classes. Both groups, but especially the first, were dependent on the expansion of the state’s apparatus. The inducements of employment, relatively good wages, and certain services and benefits—such as free medical care, the provision of kindergartens, etc.—won these groups into the coalition and tied them at the same time to the state by creating their dependency on the state’s employment and wage policies (Perthes 1997; Hinnebusch 1996; 2002). The main “incorporating” institutions were party and bureaucracy. Both were and still are the biggest providers of patronage networks for the state. These patronage networks have created—often on the basis of the manipulation of the primordial, dealt with in Section 4—a vertical network of dependency which deeply pervades most parts of society, with the president ultimately emerging at its pivot point, something which has lent him a very high level of control (Perthes 1997: 152; Ayubi 1995: 245). Patronage is also closely intertwined with corruption, another control device, as illegal personal enrichment has been tolerated but at the same time has enabled the regime to strip the relevant person of office on legal grounds. A further control device has been the balancing and counterbalancing of various institutions. The interconnections of bureaucracy and party and their supervision by the security apparatus are an example of such balancing.<sup>33</sup> The other main pillar of the regime during this period, apart from the urban working classes and wage-earning middle classes, remained those parts of the rural sector that profited most from Asad’s agricultural policies: the “middle peasantry.”<sup>34</sup> Though Asad had not followed the radical course, and thus material inducements for the middle peasantry had decreased in comparison to the former decade—though not considerably, as the state could afford a relatively generous inclusionary strategy due to its semi-rentier nature—this group remained a stable base of the regime as Asad had inherited a certain amount of legitimacy within that group (Hinnebusch 1979; 1990; 2002).

The rather broad coalition of the second period has been somehow narrowed down in the third period, from the mid-1980s to the present. The reshuffling of the power edifice was

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<sup>33</sup> Perthes 1997: 153. For more details on bureaucratic forms of power see Ayubi 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Hinnebusch 1996. Hinnebusch uses the term “middle peasantry” to draw a more differentiated picture than that of “either [...] poor or richer rural strata.” Hinnebusch 1996: 85.

triggered by the severe economic crises of the 1980s, which “reflected the structural inability of the statist economy to generate domestically the resources needed for further capital accumulation and imports” (Perthes 1997: 250). The regime reacted with the mobilization of domestic private capital through a second *infitah*, which entailed several privatizations as well as a decrease in the state’s grip over the market and other “limited” liberal measures. It should be mentioned, though, that this was/is a strategy of regime consolidation, which instead of diminishing state power has extended the state’s patronage networks into the private sector as the state selectively distributes access to resources and the market, creating dependencies. The narrowing of the coalition, also caused/accompanied by the serious decline in foreign aid, did not demobilize or drastically exclude the urban working class or the wage-earning middle classes; instead there was a halt in their growth or attainment of privileges. However, the bureaucracy and party still remain the state’s most important bases for patronage networks and are thus of continuing importance for the state. In particular, the bureaucracy’s extensive set of regulations is the regime’s most effective instrument for containing the power of the “self-employed middle classes”<sup>35</sup> and the bourgeoisie (Perthes 1997: 203-251). Thus, one cannot speak of an exclusion of the middle and working classes or of the demobilization of the institutions incorporating them. Most notable, however, is the fact that the middle peasantry, though witnessing a more drastic decline in economic rewards from the regime than during the 1970s, can indeed be still considered a more or less stable base of the regime. This can be attributed, as proposed by Raymond Hinnebusch, to the fact that the Ba’th regime still enjoys a certain legitimacy amongst them. This legitimacy is rooted in the social conflicts of the 1950s that preceded (Hinnebusch 1979; 1990; 2002), and then were somehow reflected in, the Ba’th’s “hard brand of populism” (Heydemann 1999: 21). The Syrian case thus shows that, as noted by Robert Bianchi, O’Donnell’s deterministic cycle of populist authoritarianism evolving into increasingly exclusionary and coercive bureaucratic authoritarianism<sup>36</sup> does not apply to the Middle East (Bianchi 1989: 221). Instead of abandoning its populist element, the Syrian regime, when facing the structural economic problems outlined by O’Donnell, indeed deepened its ties with domestic capital but still managed to retain its populist element to a certain extent (Ayubi 1995: 219). This was helped by the slowly increasing flow of financial aid after Syria emerged on the “winning side” of the Gulf War of 1991.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, so this section has argued, it was helped by the Ba’th’s roots in Syria’s middle peasantry. Further, it can be argued that the Syrian case deviates from O’Donnell’s cycle. As a result of economic crises, an apparent “democratization” has taken place in Syria alongside the *infitah*. Additionally, bargaining with the state for

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<sup>35</sup> Perthes contrasts these classes with the “wage-earning middle classes.” Perthes 1997: 101-109.

<sup>36</sup> See O’Donnell 1973. O’Donnell argues that the transition from populist to bureaucratic authoritarianism is due to structural economic factors. He describes bureaucratic authoritarianism as a more exclusionary and coercive type of authoritarianism than its populist counterpart. He also argues that in this type of an alliance with private capital is sought in order to deepen industrialization.

<sup>37</sup> Perthes 1997: 34. What is meant here is the Iraq-Kuwait-USA war.

genuine democratic concessions can be witnessed, though it is severely limited. Though it might be premature to compare the Syrian case with the Egyptian case—where Bianchi has noted the possibility of state corporatism gradually turning into the more liberal “societal-corporatism,” and thus of populist authoritarianism ultimately turning into a more liberal rather than a more repressive form of corporatism (Ayubi 1995: 219-220)—it seems that under Bashar Al-Asad, Syria is increasingly embarking on a path similar to that of Egypt, though of course much more cautiously (Perthes 2002).

This section has argued that the Syrian regime has a relatively high ability to employ material inducements to forge alliances; to institutionalize these alliances, so as to effectively control them; and to reshuffle them when required. The Syrian regime has not only been able to move from a very limited inclusion of private capital in the 1970s to its mobilization in the 1980s, it has also managed to keep its constituencies broad and diverse, first on the basis of its semi-rentier nature and second, and more importantly, based on the degree of legitimacy it enjoys among the middle peasantry. Syria has thus not embarked on the full transformation into a bureaucratic-authoritarian system, but has been able to sustain—though in a limited manner—its populist element.

### 3.4.3 *Material Power and the “Tacit Pact”*

The previous sections have looked at the Syrian regime’s power through a “corporatist lense.” This has entailed the conceptualization of power as the regime’s ability to gain obedience through the employment of punitive and material inducements. This section will demonstrate that punitive and material inducements are employed in order to build a certain alliance, through which obedience is then realized. This alliance will be conceptualized as a “tacit pact.”<sup>38</sup> This concept implies stepping beyond the issue of mere repression as material inducements are included in the analysis. It also implies overcoming the confinement of studies such as Linz’s, which fail to describe authentic traits of authoritarianism, because it offers the “tacit pact” as such a trait.

The preceding sections have shown, firstly, that the state forges alliances on the basis of material inducements, not only at the macrolevel but also at the microlevel where state power is funneled down through patronage to the individual (Ayubi 1995: 245). However, as it has been argued that the acceptance of economic rewards creates the dependency of the accepting party on the distributing one, the relationship between the two parties is unequal (Perthes 1997). Secondly, it has been shown that such economic inclusion contains an element of exclusion in so far as inequality and dependency find expression in a particular arrangement where political voice is traded for economic rewards, where economic inclusion thus entails political exclusion, and which is made possible by the semi-rentier nature of the Syrian state (Fürting 1994, Hinnebusch 2002). Thirdly, the societal elements included are under constant

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<sup>38</sup> This expression is borrowed from Nazih Ayubi, though he refers to a “tacit political pact.” Ayubi 1995: 246.

threat of exclusion and/or violence, made credible by the regime's successful domination of the security apparatus. Fourthly, the domination of the security apparatus is guaranteed through the validity of the preceding three and the following two points, not only in relation to civilian elements but also in relation to all elements within the security apparatus (Perthes 1997: 146-154). Fifthly, exclusion and or violence will be executed in the case of noncompliance, or it might occasionally be employed *seemingly arbitrarily*. This arbitrariness is, however, *strategic*. It is either applied in the case of changing external circumstances, when a reconfiguration of the net of alliances is necessary to secure regime survival, or it refers to the regime's regular strategy of a constant balancing and counterbalancing of forces within and between the institutions (Perthes 1997). Sixthly, both aspects, "repression and/or exclusion" and the distribution of economic rewards, go hand in hand in the process of alliance building. The "repression and/or exclusion" that noncompliance entails will enter the utility-maximization calculations of individuals, just as the prospect of material inducements does. The state thus employs punitive and material inducements alike in order to build a particular alliance, through which obedience is then realized. This alliance can be conceptualized as a "tacit pact," which refers to an inequitable relationship between two parties. Exclusion from the pact and/or coercion, which are exerted in the case of noncompliance, remain a permanent threat for the weaker party. The pact is further marked by an extremely high level of ambiguity. This blurs the lines between exclusion and inclusion and between conformity and nonconformity: first, inclusion per se implies exclusion, that is, economic inclusion entails political exclusion; second, economic exclusion and violence might be applied *seemingly arbitrarily* even in the case of compliance; and third, economic exclusion and coercion are inherent in the act of compliance as they have entered the utility-maximization calculations of individuals. It is this ambiguity, achieved through the blurring of demarcation lines, that can be said to demobilize the weaker party (Wedeen 1999: 45) and to thus render the "tacit pact" even more effective than it already is due to its offering of material inducements and its constant threat of coercion. However, it is important to note that the ambiguity of the pact not only affects the weaker party but also renders the "tacit pact" an ambiguous tool of domination: the blurring of the lines between conformity and nonconformity in a sense invites their transgression. The severe social unrest of the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as the continuous existence of opposition (Abd-Allah 1983) clearly demonstrate that the "tacit pact," as a form of domination, fails to achieve enduring and far-reaching obedience and is thus far from producing political stability (Heydemann 1999: 2-3).

This section has argued that the Syrian regime employs punitive and material inducements in order to build a "tacit pact," through which obedience is realized. The notion of the "tacit pact" implies overcoming both a sole focus on repression and the mere definition of authoritarianism in terms of what it is *not*.

#### 4 The Concept of Cultural Hegemony and Its Limits: A Culturalist Approach

Section 3 argued in favor of studying the state using a corporatist approach. This entailed the conceptualization of the regime's power as "material" and of its realization of obedience as a "tacit pact." This section will argue that the study of the state using the corporatist approach alone is insufficient and that this approach needs to be blended with a culturalist perspective, which entails the understanding of power as "ideational." It will further argue that "ideational" forms of power also realize obedience through a "tacit pact."

##### 4.1 Theoretical Context: A Critique of the Corporatist Approach

This section will briefly mention the flaws of the corporatist approach and its conceptualization of power as "material" and will argue for the blending of the corporatist approach with a culturalist perspective.

It has been argued that approaches such as corporatism, which understand power as the regime's ability to gain obedience through the employment of punitive and material inducements, see discourse as "epiphenomenal" and thus "fail to analyze the state's attempts to control the symbolic world" (Wedeen 1999: 5). They thus fail to acknowledge how this discourse can function as a form of power in itself and accordingly cannot account for why the Syrian regime spends vast amounts of money on Asad's personality cult (Wedeen 1999: 5).

It can be argued that these failures stem from the corporatist approaches' insufficient linking of the macrolevel and the microlevel. It links these mainly through the concept of rational choice. However, this concept's rationality assumption has often been criticized for being simplistic and "too strict and unrealistic to apply to real situations" (Kato 1996: 573). As an alternative, more differentiated concepts like that of "bounded rationality" (Kato 1996: 573) have been put forward. This concept draws a more realistic picture by focusing on the "subjectivity of goal-oriented behaviour,"<sup>39</sup> which is dependent on "the perceptual and evaluational premises of the subjects" (Kato 1996: 575-576) and thus pays more attention "to 'the institutional framework within which choice takes place' and to the roles of values and norms in individual decision-making."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, David Laitin has argued that utility-maximization calculations only make sense if the cultural realm, with its symbols and rhetoric, is incorporated into analysis, as only in this way can the preferences of the individual, crucial for any such calculation, be adequately accounted for (Laitin 1986: 181). Though socio-historical institutionalism, and thus corporatism, does not adhere to the strict economic rationality assumption criticized here—as it indeed looks at the influence of the institutional framework on choice—it does, however, look insufficiently at culture. It incorpo-

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<sup>39</sup> Kato 1996: 575. Corporatism does not adhere to a strict economic rationality assumption as it acknowledges partial limitations of that concept by paying attention to "the institutional framework within which choice takes place" (Kato 1996: 566). It does not, however, look sufficiently at the cultural realm, as will be discussed later.

<sup>40</sup> Little as quoted in Kato 1996: 566.

rates it into the analysis merely in so far as it asks how it influences “the ordering of relations and the understanding of political institutions.”<sup>41</sup> It does not, however, focus on symbols and rhetoric and thus largely ignores the possibility that those might function “as forms of power in their own right” (Wedeen 1999: 5).

This section has argued that the corporatist approach insufficiently links the macrolevel to the microlevel as its rationality assumption is too limited. It has been argued that this assumption should be extended to include the cultural realm of symbols and rhetoric, as those might then be given the possibility of being a form of powering in themselves.

#### **4.2 Conceptualizing the Culturalist Approach: The Preference for the Concept of Cultural Hegemony over Essentialism and Instrumentalism**

This section will argue that in order to include the cultural realm of symbols and rhetoric in the analysis, this realm should be conceptualized according to an understanding of the Gramscian concept of hegemony that steps beyond instrumentalist and essentialist assumptions.

The concept of hegemony assumes that a state rules through a “hegemonic bloc” forged by “those political elites that are successful in establishing a dominant cultural framework” (Laitin 1986: 171) through their rhetoric and manipulation of symbols. This cultural framework creates “legitimacy amongst the people and thus alleviates collective action.” Accordingly, it helps the state/elites to further enhance obedience and accumulate wealth. However, as Laitin has argued, this dominant framework is not, as instrumentalists assume, freely forged by the elites but is instead tied to concepts, ideas, and identities that are already existent in society and that make sense to the people in their respective circumstances (Laitin 1986). Laitin further argues that due to this instrumentalization of the cultural, which also entails its modification (Ayubi 1995: 167), the essentialist claim that the cultural per se determines politics and that it, furthermore, does so in an unchanged fashion is no longer tenable.

#### **4.3 The Aspect of Power in the Culturalist Perspective: “Ideational” Power**

##### ***4.3.1 The Application of the Concept of Hegemony and Its Limits***

The previous section depicted the concept of hegemony as the state’s instrumentalization of rhetoric and symbols in order to increase obedience and enhance its wealth. In other words, hegemony is understood as a specific form of power, which will here be termed “ideational” power. This section will draw attention to the limits of the concept of hegemony and will accordingly argue for a specific application of it in order to enable the study of the forms of power it provides to the regime.

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<sup>41</sup> Migdal 2001: 246. The corporatist study might be said to look at culture in so far as the prominent patronage networks, mentioned in the previous sections, might be given more coherency, meaning and strength through the manipulation of the primordial, which might imply traits coherent to those of patron-client relationships. However, for a detailed discussion see section 4.3.3.



E.P. Thompson has argued that in order to analyze the “ideational” forms of power the concept of hegemony provides to the regime, analysis should focus on “the images of power and authority, [and] the popular mentalities of subordination” (Migdal 2001: 240). As the state’s rhetoric and manipulation of symbols create a kind of legitimacy or, more precisely, an *internalized* “horizon of the taken-for-granted,”<sup>42</sup> which will be referred to here simply as “belief” (Wedeen 1999: 5), a strict congruency of “images of power” and “popular mentalities of subordination” is assumed. However, Lisa Wedeen has criticized the assumption that the state’s rhetoric and manipulation of symbols necessarily create hegemonic “belief.” She argues that in the case of Syria no such “belief” is being produced or internalized, but that it is instead *dissimulated*—a fact which the concept of hegemony does not account for (Wedeen 1999: 6). As, accordingly, a strict congruency assumption regarding images of authority and “popular mentalities of subordination” is then no longer tenable, this paper will, instead, put forward a weak congruency assumption, in which the two aspects neither equal each other nor are mutually exclusive but rather have a certain area of overlap. Accordingly, both aspects are to be studied separately. However, the general problem concerning culturalist perspectives, that is, the difficulty of studying them comparatively, remains (Migdal 2001: 241).

This section has argued that the concept of hegemony is limited as it fails “to distinguish between [...] dissimulation of [...] belief” (Wedeen 1999: 6) and real “belief.” Thus, “ideational” power, as understood through the limited concept of hegemony, should be studied separately through, first, “images of power” and, second, “popular mentalities of subordination.” As the Syrian case challenges general comparative concepts such as that of hegemony, its relevance beyond the confines of the Syrian borders or the Middle East becomes clear.

#### 4.3.2 *Images and Symbols of Power*

Since 1970, the Ba’thist ideology in Syria has been “reduced to a particularly intensive [as well as *absurd*] personality cult around the President” (Perthes 1997: 151). This section will argue that though this cult does not produce belief in the Gramscian sense of hegemony, it still functions as a form of power in its own right. However, before proceeding, it should be pointed out that the establishment and further functioning of the cult is only made possible because it occurs in the context of the Ba’th party and its ideology, which indeed possesses a certain degree of Gramscian hegemony amongst the Syrian people. Thus, the discussion will first look at the Ba’th party and its ideology. It will subsequently look at the personality cult around the president.

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<sup>42</sup> Stuart Hall as quoted in Wedeen 1999: 11.

#### 4.3.2.1 *The Ba'th Party and Its Ideological Outlook*

Though the Ba'th ascended to power by means of a military coup, its seizure of power can be viewed as the “delayed outcome of the political mobilization of the fifties” (Hinnebusch 2001: 47). This decade was marked by an economic crisis which alienated the rising middle class,<sup>43</sup> particularly the rural middle class, as upward social mobility was decelerated. The societal segments concerned postulated development with a more equitable outcome than the status quo as the solution, which would be best achieved through state-led “socialist” industrialization and land reforms (Hinnebusch 2001: 37). The Ba'th represented this demand in its social composition and its ideological outlook. With “a distinctly plebeian, rural lower middle class ‘ex-peasant’” (Hinnebusch 2001: 47) composition, the Ba'th ideology intrinsically combined its pan-Arab nationalist struggle against imperialism and Zionism with a socialist struggle against capitalism and its main constituents within the Syrian society, namely, the traditional urban Sunni elites and the segment of large landowners (Fürtig 1994: 217). Effective opposition to imperialism and Zionism was claimed to be realized only by “uprooting [this] domestic ‘reaction’” (Hinnebusch 2001: 38). The nationalist socialist line in the Ba'thist ideology, which was followed up by a far-reaching land reform and large-scale nationalizations between 1963 and 1969—reaching their peak from 1966 to 1969 under the rule of Salah Jadid—created a certain amount of Gramscian hegemony, primarily amongst the small and middle peasantry but also amongst the urban lower and middle classes.<sup>44</sup> The Ba'th has indeed retained its plebeian character and the degree of hegemony connected to it throughout the rule of the Asad regime (Fürtig 1994: 228).<sup>45</sup> This certain degree of hegemony makes it inadequate to describe the Ba'th as “a mere facade erected to help legitimize the regime” but, however, also does not suffice to make the Ba'th “a classic mass party deriving its strength from ideology” (Sadowski in Fürtig 1994: 229). This hegemony, instead, attains its specific relevance in the context of this paper as it shapes the relationship between the president and the party. Though the president is the undeniable and sole leader of the party, he cannot afford to act abrasively in contravention of it (Fürtig 1994: 229) and has presented his policies as generally being in line with the ideological outlook of the Ba'th.<sup>46</sup> President and party can thus not be thought of in isolation from each other. It is this relationship which forms the backdrop to the personalization of power under Hafez and Bashar al-Asad, which is paralleled by the reduction of the Syrian Ba'thist ideology to a cult around their persons.

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<sup>43</sup> This was primarily a bureaucratic class.

<sup>44</sup> What is meant here are the wage-earning middle classes, in contrast to the self-employed middle classes.

<sup>45</sup> In 1994, Fürtig argues, it would still have been possible for the Ba'th to mobilize the rural population against the urban population. Fürtig 1994: 228. The Ba'th, especially through its overlap with the bureaucracy, also functions as an instrument of “material” control as described in section 3.4.2.

<sup>46</sup> Hafez al-Asad, for example, had been eager to declare that his “regime had no intention of changing the ‘nationalist socialist line’” and characterized his coup as a “‘corrective movement’ within the revolution which would merely restore it to the true path.” Hinnebusch 2001: 65.

#### 4.3.2.2 *The Personality Cult around the President*

As mentioned above, the Asad regime has promulgated an obscure personality cult around the president since Hafez al-Asad's assumption of power in 1970. This cult has not captured the hearts and minds (Wedeen 1999: 148) of the people: it has not produced "belief" in the sense of Gramscian hegemony but is instead its "anxiety-inducing simulacrum" (Wedeen 1999: 3), according to which people's behavior has been conditioned—helped and enforced by the security apparatus—into a "politics of public dissimulation" (Wedeen 1999: 6), an "acting as if" (Wedeen 1999: 5) such a "belief" was being produced. The question is then *how* this cult—if not through the conventionally assumed "device" of the internalization of "belief"—produces power. At the crux of such an analysis will be the encroachment of the cult on the body of the subject—that is, how "power relations have an immediate hold upon it; [how] they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 1979: 25)—and the repercussions this has upon the individual. This section will offer such an analysis to explain how the cult, in the absence of "belief," succeeds in producing power. It will argue that it does so because it achieves the internalization of power relations, though on the basis of cynicism rather than "belief."

First of all, the concept of hegemony needs to be transposed from the realm of contents and values into the realm of categories and "frames" of thinking and ideas. David Laitin has conducted such a transposition. He has modified Clifford Geertz's concept of the "master-narrative" (Migdal 2001: 238) by arguing that the state's rhetoric does not determine the values and specific contents of people's "beliefs" but instead determines the broad categories of such "beliefs," the notions of "what is worth fighting for" (Laitin 1986: 180), which he has termed "points of concern" (Laitin 1986: 181). Lisa Wedeen very similarly argues that though Asad's cult does not produce the "belief" in its specific contents, it does nevertheless produce a certain internalization of categories or "frames" of thinking, as it shapes, or frames, "the ways people see themselves as citizens" (Wedeen 1999: 19) and understand politics at large. She argues that this internalization is achieved through the regime's employment of the cult as a disciplinary device, which through forced participation, orchestration, and the ordering of public behavior visually and audibly plants "frames" in people's minds, thus functioning as "a mode of ambivalent interpellation, a way of 'hailing' spectators that is effective even if its claims are not taken literally" (Wedeen 1999: 32).

The question is then which specific "frame," which specific understanding of politics and citizenship, the cult puts forward. Lisa Wedeen has subsumed these specific understandings under the process of the "killing [of] politics" (Wedeen 1999: 32), which refers to not only a depoliticized but also a demobilized citizen, who accordingly ceases to be a potential political threat to the regime. The cult carries out this demobilization, first, by disorienting citizens through the totalization of the political field. This is achieved through strict censorship, the "lying" this implies, and "the elimination of all [not only political] freedoms [...] [and] the erasure of difference between individuals, or between what belongs to the state and

what belongs to the individual" (Al-Khalil 1991: 70). The cult then, second, secures the reproduction of "killed politics" through the previously mentioned process of interpellation. However, it can be argued that, first, these "frames" of thinking are being more distinctly internalized than the notion of interpellation suggests and that, second, not only "frames" but also processes that decisively link "frame" to content are being internalized. Hannah Arendt has argued that the constant lying on the part of the regime, which the absurdity of Asad's cult and the "killing of politics" necessarily entail, leads individuals

to take refuge in cynicism; [through which] instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them they would [then] protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.<sup>47</sup>

Such siding with the regime can be considered as one of the strategies of self-defense, says Al-Khalil, in which the individual, who is being encroached upon physically by the cult's participatory demands and mentally by an enduring and all-penetrating atmosphere of fear, seeks to sustain his or her "self" (Al-Khalil 1991).

Most importantly, though, this siding with the regime is then, firstly, reified through enforced participation in the cult (Wedeen 1999: 6), leading to a situation in which the individual is pushed into convincing him- or herself that s/he participates *voluntarily*. Secondly, this siding, perceived as voluntary, is then—in an almost "Foucauldian manner"—internalized by individuals through the disciplinary effects of the cult, which Wedeen has described as emerging when the cult is disciplining and organizing individuals "for the physical enactment of ritual gestures, regimenting their bodies into an order that symbolizes and prepares for [and is an instantiation of] political obedience" (Al-Khalil 1999: 19) and power. Thus, the internalization of power relations is established upon cynicism, the inauthentic will it produces to "act as if" "belief" exists, and their internalization through disciplinary effects. The coinciding of internalization and "belief" which the concept of hegemony suggests, however, remains absent. The nature of the internalization proposed here not only exceeds the level of internalization that the notion of interpellation implies—as it goes beyond mere "physical" internalization by initially including the mind in the process—it also goes beyond assuming that merely "frames" are being internalized as it establishes a distinct relationship between "frame" and content, that is, one that is initially based on cynicism. However, due to the absence of "belief," the nature of the described internalization remains defunct and thus manifests in the high level of ambiguity of the cult as an effective tool of power. Wedeen has argued that this ambiguity is enhanced by the cult's phony claims and its at times "absurd" appropriation of symbols which have the inherent potential to provoke indignation and protest and which also invite transgression in so far as they offer the needed vocabulary and symbols (Al-Khalil 1999: 87-143).

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt in Al-Khalil 1991: 115.

It can, however, be argued that these effects of the lack of “belief” are to a certain extent compensated by the mobilization and manipulation of the few main *real* legitimacies or “beliefs” the Syrian regime actually possesses; namely, that the regime protects its citizens from the Israeli threat and that the rule of Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad has created a hitherto unknown stability in Syria (Wedeen 1999). The regime mobilizes and manipulates these legitimacies by upholding and fuelling the perception of these threats, which include not only the fear of renewed Israeli aggression and of civil strife based on sectarianism—of which the Lebanese civil war remains a constant reminder—but also the fear of civil strife based on ideological discrepancies that occurred in the coup-ridden years before Hafez Al-Asad’s assumption of power.<sup>48</sup> The mobilization of threat perception, then, compensates to a certain extent for the lack of “belief” in internalization as it, first, increases the general level of fear, thus making strategies of self-defense, such as Arendt’s cynicism, more necessary; second, increases that cynicism since the individual then believes that a better alternative to the present regime doesn’t even exist; and thus, third, introduces an element of real “belief” into the process of internalization. However, the inherent ambiguity of the cult as a tool of power is not overcome but only decreased through these processes.

This section has argued that the personality cult around Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad operates as a form of power in itself, as it achieves the internalization of power relations. This is not, as conventionally assumed, an internalization of the cult’s contents on the basis of “belief,” but instead an internalization of the cult’s “frames” on the basis of interpellation and cynicism. As cynicism establishes a link between “frame” and content, a certain internalization of content is also being effected. The absence of “belief” in this process, however, renders the cult only an ambiguous tool of power for the regime. That ambiguity remains even though the regime attempts to reduce it through the mobilization and manipulation of perceived threats. The argument pursued here has implied a certain rethinking of the concept of hegemony as it has, first, introduced the concept of “points of concern” or “frames” of thinking and as it has, second, proposed an internalization of power relations that does not coincide with “belief.”

### 4.3.3 *Mentalities of Subordination*

The previous section argued that the regime’s manipulation of images of authority has produced power as it has led to the *internalization* of power relations. This section will argue that the state’s manipulation of “popular mentalities of subordination” produces power as it results in a *mediation* of power relations that provides these relations with a certain degree of hegemony and thus facilitates and enhances their function. It is then the interrelation between hegemony and the process of internalization that re-establishes, though only to a limited extent, the congruency assumption between “images of power and authority” and “popular mentalities of subordination” that was completely destroyed in the previous sec-

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Heydemann 1999; Perthes 1997; Wedeen 1999.

tion. As this section, however, will remain congruent with the two criticisms that have now been put forward regarding the concept of hegemony, it will, first, maintain and *explain* the assumption of this congruency as weak and, second, understand hegemony as referring to “frames” rather than to specific content (Laitin 1986; Wedeen 1999).

Hisham Sharabi has argued that in the Middle East all primary institutions such as family, clan, or religious sect [...] show analogous forms of authority and violence which have their roots in patriarchal values (Sharabi 1988: 8). These values can be described as a “survivalist, blind sense of group loyalty” (Ayubi 1995: 166) accompanied by the notion of total submission to the absolute will of the patriarch, which is “mediated [...] by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion” (Sharabi 1988: 7). Submission to the patriarch entails the patriarch’s responsibility to guarantee the material well-being of the subordinate. Nonconformity, on the other hand, is sanctioned with the denial of this guarantee and/or with coercion (Wedeen 1999: 51). This value pattern coincides with vertical, personalistic social structures, resulting in the paramountcy of the patriarch who emerges at the peak of the structure. However, it can be argued that patriarchal mentalities and structures do not stem from culture per se, as Sharabi depicts, but from a certain precapitalist mode of production and its exchange patterns. As a precapitalist economy cannot rely on “the implacable hidden violence of [the] objective mechanism [of the market], it resorts” (Mitchell 1990: 550) to another form of domination, which Bourdieu has termed “symbolic violence.”<sup>49</sup> Here social and economic subordination, that is, violence, is translated into or *disguised* as ties of patriarchal values such as of kinship, generosity, or personal loyalty. The notion of “symbolic violence” will gain a special significance in the following section. Further, it should be argued that these values, or “popular mentalities of subordination,” do not survive in current-day Syria in an unchanged fashion, as Sharabi argues, but that their manipulation and mobilization through the regime instead entails their transformation (Ayubi 1995: 167).

The regime manipulates these “popular mentalities of subordination” through discourse, by invoking metaphors of the patriarchal family. As the last section argued that the cult shapes the people’s notions of themselves as depoliticized citizens through the “totalization” of politics, this section will now argue that it is exactly this “frame” of the depoliticized citizen that is mediated through the notion of patriarchy. However, in the process of this mediation of power relations the primordial is transformed: “Patriarchal connectivity [is extended] from specific families to a mythic, national family, of which Asad is the male head” (Wedeen 1995: 52). Asad is thus “*like* the familial patriarch: similar to [him] but bigger, better, and more powerful,” and citizens are thus turned into “children-citizen[s] [who] owe him their obedience,” while he has the “responsibility to provide for [...] [their] material needs” (Wedeen 1995: 51). In a similar manner, it can be argued that the patriarchal metaphor can also serve to mediate the “frame” of understanding politics as corporatist, as the corporatist

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<sup>49</sup> Bourdieu as quoted in Mitchell 1990: 550.

idea of the state as an organic formation with no internal divisions (Perthes 1999: 135) is similar to patriarchal “group loyalty” (Ayubi 1995). Thus a certain element of “belief” enters the process of “frame” internalization the previous section described. Accordingly, a certain congruency between images of authority, that is, discourse, and “popular mentalities of subordination” is established. This congruency, however, remains weak as the discourse’s main function is, as the previous section has shown, not to mobilize popular mentalities or “belief,” but to achieve internalization largely in the *absence* of “belief.”

In order to mediate power relations, the regime also employs certain material means to mobilize and manipulate “popular mentalities of subordination.” Most notable in this regard is the establishment of informal patronage networks which underpin the formal institutional landscape, as described in Section 3. These networks are usually created through the recruitment predominantly of members of the Alawi sect into the institutions of the security apparatus, and through the recruitment of close family members and other “people of trust” (Tripp 2002-03: 26) into key state positions (Ayubi 1995). The recruitment of Alawis or close family members of the president can be argued to manifest in something similar to what Laitin has described as hegemony through principles of “indirect rule,” where the recruitment of a specific group into certain institutions is assumed to produce the hegemony of its cultural framework.<sup>50</sup> In Syria, however, this has taken place to a much lesser degree than Laitin implies. Sectarianism and familiarism as a constitutive subset (Sharabi 1988: 27) are established as a certain—but far from complete—hegemonic framework.<sup>51</sup> This is then translated by the regime into patronage networks in which it mediates the power relations, with the effect that state power is more effectively funneled down to the microlevel of the individual (Ayubi 1995: 167). However, in this process the primordial is being transformed. As privileged recruitment for *key-* positions is not so much based on membership in a certain sect but first and foremost on personal loyalty to the president, the primordial structure is extended to the president in a way that lets him emerge as the sole patron at the pivot of the structure, transforming all citizens into his clients (Ayubi 1995: 246). This implies that evolving patronage networks see, to a certain degree, a shift “from reliance on kinsmen [and sect] to a reliance on patrons.”<sup>52</sup>

It is, however, important to mention the ambiguity that is inherent in the exploitation of the primordial as a means to accumulate power. First, the social unrest from 1976–82 has shown that mobilized sectarianism can be a serious threat to the regime (Heydemann 1999: 3). Second, the established patronage networks can also hinder the regime, as it is to a degree de-

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<sup>50</sup> Laitin 1986: 166.

<sup>51</sup> However, this hegemony is far from being complete due to, for example, the decisive avoidance of the topic of sectarianism in the regime’s rhetoric and the distinct transformation of the primordial that the second process of power-relations mediation entails. On the avoidance of the topic of sectarianism see for example Van Dam 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Gellner as quoted in Fathi 1994: 186. He refers here specifically to how the concept of tribalism changed. But it can be used here since we assume that all primary institutions rely on same sense of loyalty.

pendent upon them.<sup>53</sup> The manipulation of the primordial thus remains only an ambiguous tool of power for the regime.

This section has argued that the regime's manipulation of "popular mentalities of subordination" produces power because it achieves a *mediation* of power relations that bestows upon these relations a certain degree of hegemony that enhances and facilitates their function. Hegemony in this instance has largely been understood as referring to "frames" rather than to content and as producing only a *weak* congruency between images of authority and "popular mentalities of subordination." Further, it has been argued that the mobilization of the primordial remains only an ambiguous tool of domination.

#### 4.3.4 *Ideational Power and the "Tacit Pact"*

The previous sections have studied the Syrian regime's "ideational" forms of power. They have argued that while the regime's manipulation of "images of power" produces power by achieving the *internalization* of power relations, its manipulation of "popular mentalities of subordination" produces power by achieving a *mediation* of power relations that provides these relations with a certain degree of hegemony. This section will argue that both these forms of "ideational" power realize obedience through a "tacit pact." This implies, as will be pointed out, a certain rethinking of the concept of hegemony.

It has been argued that the "popular mentalities of subordination" through which power relations are mediated rely largely on a similar set of values rooted in the concept of patriarchy. It has been assumed that this mediation bestows a certain degree of hegemony upon power relations. This hegemony, however, refers not so much to specific contents as to "frames." Thus it is not the "belief" in Asad as the "Über-Father" but rather "belief" in the abstract functioning and ordering of "patriarchal" power-relations that is created. This paper conceptualizes these abstract orderings as a "tacit pact." This pact refers, first, to a relationship of unequal parties, as one party *submits* to the other. It refers, second, to a contractual element in that relationship, as the stronger party, in return for submission, is responsible for securing the material well-being of the weaker party. It refers, third, to the fact that this relationship is sustained through the fact that nonsubmission, that is, noncompliance, is sanctioned with the withdrawal of material rewards and/or coercion (Wedeen 1999, Sharabi 1988) It refers, fourth, to a high inherent level of ambiguity, which on the one hand demobilizes the weaker party,<sup>54</sup> rendering the pact more efficient, and which on the other hand destabilizes the effectiveness of the pact as a tool of domination.<sup>55</sup> The generation of ambiguity can be explained through the concept of "symbolic violence." The previous section argued that patriarchal values and structures—and thus also the "tacit pact," which is a certain ab-

<sup>53</sup> See Baram 1997 and Tripp 2002-03. Both refer to Iraq. For Syria see Perthes 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Wedeen 1999: 45. Arendt talks about how lying about political contents creates depoliticization. The following analogy can be drawn: a general "environment of ambiguity" creates general demobilization.

<sup>55</sup> For example, the social unrest of the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Hinnebusch 1990.



straction of these—represent a *disguised* violence. Violence is, thus, not only applied to the weaker party in the case of nonsubmission, but is also inherent in the act of subordination itself (Mitchell 1990: 550-555). This ambiguity can on the one hand affect the demobilization of the weaker party (Wedeen 1999: 45), making it more susceptible to the “tacit pact” and thus rendering the pact more efficient. On the other hand, the ambiguity also blurs the distinction between conformity and nonconformity, in a sense encouraging nonconformity and destabilizing the effectiveness of the pact as a tool of domination.

It can be further argued that the regime’s manipulation of images and symbols, through which power relations are internalized, also realizes obedience through a “tacit pact.” The cult itself represents the reification of such a pact. The citizens’ participation in an overtly absurd cult and their shouting of phony slogans which can clearly not be explained through voluntary hegemonic “belief” demonstrates the inequality of the constitutive parties and the fact that the weaker one is conforming because nonconformity is punished with coercion. As the cult (its “frames” and to a certain extent also its contents) is being internalized through disciplinary effects, this implies the internalization of the “tacit pact” it reifies.<sup>56</sup> There is, again, a high level of ambiguity inherent in the pact, which on the one hand demobilizes the weaker party,<sup>57</sup> rendering the pact more efficient, and which on the other hand destabilizes the effectiveness of the pact as a tool of domination. Similarly to the implications of “symbolic violence,” the complex process of internalization through fear, cynicism and disciplinary effects, as argued in section 4.3.2, already includes an element of violence.<sup>58</sup> Thus, violence is experienced by the weaker party not only in the act of nonconformity but also in the act of conformity itself. This ambiguity affects, on the one hand, the demobilization of the weaker party, making it more susceptible to the “tacit pact” and thus rendering the pact more efficient. On the other hand, it also blurs the distinction between conformity and nonconformity, and, thus, to a certain extent invites transgression, rendering the pact only an equivocal instrument for domination.

This section has argued that the regime’s “ideational” forms of power realize obedience through a “tacit pact.” This pact describes an inequitable relationship between two unequal parties. Because in the event of noncompliance the weaker party is sanctioned with coercion, it sees itself as being under permanent threat of such action. Built into the pact is a high level of ambiguity, as violence is not only applied in the case of noncompliance but is also an inherent element in the act of compliance per se. This ambiguity renders the pact more effective but at the same time also destabilizes this effectiveness. This concept of the “tacit pact” has implied a certain rethinking of the concept of hegemony as it represents a hegemonic “frame,” rather than content or value, which only partly coincides with “belief.”

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<sup>56</sup> See Wedeen in combination with Al-Khalil and Arendt as quoted in Al-Khalil 1996: 115.

<sup>57</sup> Wedeen: 45. Arendt talks about how lying about political contents creates depoliticization. The following analogy can be made: a general “environment of ambiguity” creates a general demobilization.

<sup>58</sup> It includes violence in so far as it is violence that makes strategies of self-defense necessary in the first place. It also contributes to the cynicism Arendt mentions. Compare to Mitchell 1990: 550-551.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has sought an explanation for the longevity of authoritarian rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad which goes beyond those approaches that seek an answer in either the primordial or repression alone. The issue at stake has been conceptualized as the study of the regime through the study of the state, at the crux of which has been the question of power. The state has been studied using a corporatist approach blended with a culturalist perspective. Thus the regime's "material" as well as "ideational" forms of power have been analyzed. The discussion has demonstrated that the several forms of power the regime possesses all rely on realizing obedience through a common underlying principle, which can be conceptualized as a "tacit pact." With regard to "material" forms of power, this pact is a *political* pact in which political voice is traded for economic rewards, that is, in which the weaker party is economically included but politically excluded. With regard to "ideational" forms of power, this pact is a "frame" that is *internalized* through interpellation and a specific process constituted of fear, cynicism and disciplinary effects and is *mediated* through a transformed concept of patriarchy. In both instances, however, the "tacit pact" is between unequal parties, and the weaker party is under constant threat of exclusion and/or violence in the case of noncompliance. The pact is further marked by a high level of ambiguity, generated because elements of exclusion and/or violence are introduced into the act of conformity, and thus no longer merely refer to nonconformity. The pact is rendered more effective through this ambiguity, as it demobilizes the weaker party and thus makes it more susceptible to the pact. At the same time, however, the ambiguity also destabilizes the pact as an instrument of control because the blurring of the demarcating lines between conformity and nonconformity in a sense invites their transgression. As both the regime's "material" as well as "ideational" forms of power share this common principle of the "tacit pact," their compatibility, if not congruency, is generated. This produces a convergence of forces, manifesting in the regime's power to exceed the mere sum of its individual forms of power and, thus, lending the authoritarian rule in Syria under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad its striking resilience. Resilience, however, is not to be equated with *stability*. As the "tacit pact" remains only an ambiguous tool of domination, it fails to achieve enduring and far-reaching obedience. Thus, opposition to the regime is almost constantly encountered, and will most probably continue to be encountered in the future.

The approach chosen here has gone beyond the common culturalist and structural-institutionalist explanations in so far as it has, first, added the power to employ material inducements to the power to employ punitive ones and has, second, combined the study of those "material" forms of power with that of "ideational" ones, which are commonly examined in isolation from each other (Migdal 2001: 232). It has also, finally, considered the relationship and interactions between these different forms of power (Mitchell 1990). The specific conceptualization of their common underlying principle as a "tacit pact," then, has a relevance that goes beyond the confines of Syria or the Middle East as it challenges—or

stimulates a rethinking of—broader comparative concepts. First, it seeks to overcome those conceptualizations of authoritarianism that remain tied to descriptions of what it is *not*, that is, democracy, by attempting to offer an authentic trait of its own: the pact itself can be understood as such a trait. Second, it represents a certain rethinking of the concept of hegemony, as it refers to a hegemonic “frame” rather than to hegemonic values or content and as it refers to a more nuanced account of the reception, acceptance and internalization of such a “frame” than the mere explanation of “belief” offers. Third, the pact can be said to cut through the conventional dichotomous conceptualization of power as being either “material” or “ideational.” Cutting through this dichotomy generates the “tacit pact,” which not only introduces elements of exclusion and/or violence into the act of conformity but at the same time also *disguises* them: submission is then mediated as a primordial value (Wedeen 1999), is internalized through a specific kind of cynicism that *forges* a false voluntary will, or comes as part of the package of economic rewards. The pact thus resembles Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic violence,” in which violence comes in “the guise of voluntary acceptance” (Mitchell 1990: 551) and is thus no longer clearly distinguishable from it. Accordingly, “symbolic violence” and the “tacit pact” cut through conventional conceptualizations of power as being either “material”—that is, referring to material and punitive inducements that enable the influencing of an individual’s behavior—or “ideational”—that is, referring to the “voluntary acceptance of an ideology” (Mitchell 1990: 550) coinciding with hegemonic “belief.” It is important to mention, though, that the “tacit pact” does not subscribe fully to the hybridity of Bourdieu’s concept, which would be very difficult to employ analytically as the lines between violence and voluntary will are blurred to such an extent that both categories are rendered unrecognizable. The “tacit pact” instead recognizes and preserves the separated categories of “material” and “ideational” power, but does not simply assume that they are mutually exclusive. It is then this gray area of overlap that makes the convergence of compatible and congruent forces, which has lent Syrian authoritarian rule under Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad its striking resilience, possible in the first place.

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