

PREAMBLE

An Arab Spring for Syria?

AS I WRITE THESE LINES, Syria is engulfed in antiregime protests, spanning nearly its entire territory; the two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, have experienced the least turmoil. Hundreds of protesters have been killed, and thousands have been injured or detained.

Though the protests are ongoing, it is difficult to assume or even imagine they would result in a scenario similar to that of Egypt and Tunisia, where the head of the regime departs or resigns in favor of an outcome that, by and large, sustains the institutions of the regime. An all-out civil war similar to that in Libya is possible only if external factors become increasingly involved. At this point, in May 2011, it seems the regime is gaining the upper hand by violently crushing the uprisings, knowing full well that many if not most Syrians have refrained from taking to the streets largely because of fear of the unknown: for many, the regime's departure or fall may result in a vacuum of sorts that might be filled by a more undesirable alternative, including sectarian strife, external intervention, or an all-out war of reprisal. Thus, the question for most Syrians is not whether they would like to see a less repressive regime but whether they think such a change is likely under these local and regional circumstances. The complexity of the Syrian situation is evident, but can be overestimated by those who favor the status quo for one reason or another.

In this book, these recent and ongoing events will not figure explicitly except when certain facts have been altered, such as the literal elimination of the hitherto pivotal post of deputy prime minister for economic affairs, which was occupied before March 2011 by Abdallah al-Dardari (this is a sign of a reversion to more public-sector-friendly policies). Completed in January 2011, the analysis herein comports with the unfolding events by way of a number of warnings against the perils of "continuity without change" in the political sphere. More pertinent is the analysis of how elite economic networks, combining political and economic actors, have for decades undermined even the semblance of

equality and productivity in the Syrian economy in favor of the few. The deleterious outcome of this largely informal nexus of economic power came increasingly at the expense of the largest segments of Syrian society, which continue to be disenfranchised both politically and economically. Thus, the reservoir of discontent in Syria runs much deeper than one might think on the basis of the modest number of protesters we have witnessed, for there are always other considerations made by citizens before taking to the streets, as suggested above. Fortunately for the regime, unsavory actors regionally and globally have once again played an unintentional role in keeping it afloat.

I will leave the reader with no scenarios or predictions, as this is not my role. Suffice it to say that structural factors dealing with the relationship of state, society, and market will outlive any social force, or regime, that remains standing. It is these factors to which this book has been devoted over its fifteen years of research and preparation, and with which researchers will grapple endlessly, irrespective of the political form of rule.