Joshua Stacher  

In a defining interview President Bashar al-Asad granted to the *Wall Street Journal* on January 30, 2011, shortly before the outbreak of revolution in his country, the Syrian leader repeatedly stressed the point that Syria was not Tunisia or Egypt. If he meant to say that the “Arab Spring” would skip over Syria, he was badly mistaken, as the fire of protest and rebellion soon reached Syria and rapidly spread throughout whole country. Still, in contrast to the regimes in Tunis and Cairo, Bashar’s regime had managed to survive the wave of opposition for the first three years of the Syrian civil war, which indicated that in many ways there were indeed genuine differences between Syria and Tunisia and Egypt.

Syria has most often been compared with Lebanon and Iraq in the academic literature, because each of these states consists of several religious and ethnic communities. The character of the relations between these various communities, and the communities’ relations with the state, are key questions in understanding the history and the structure of government or regime in each of these countries, and, more generally, the structure of their political systems.

In *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta, Syria and Iran were compared, from the angle of political activism. In these two states society functions under authoritarian rule. Furthermore, they have come together in a political alliance based upon their common interests and common opponents in an axis that in the West has been called the “axis of evil,” but in the Sunni world is looked upon

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through the prism of the Shiʿi crescent, with its beginning in Tehran, continuing to Baghdad, and ending in Damascus and Beirut.

In my own research on the period of Bashar’s father, Hafiz al-Asad, I often compared Syria with North Korea and even Romania. In each of these countries the ruling dynasty wrapped itself in an ideological mantle provided by the ruling party. In North Korea and Romania it was the Communist Party, in Syria, the Baʿth Party. In time these states were joined by others: Cuba ruled by the Castro brothers and several Arab states, like Iraq of Saddam Hussein and his sons, ‘Uday and Qusay, Libya of the Qaddafi dynasty, and even Egypt and Yemen, where Husni Mubarak and ‘Ali Salih tried to transfer power to their sons.

In the book *Adaptable Autocrats*, Joshua Stacher sets out to compare Egypt and Syria. The comparison is based upon the fact that the regime in each country had its origins in the officers’ coups that took place in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. Those rebellious groups of young officers, who were often referred at the time as neo-Mamluks, held radical views that were nationalist, socialist, and secular. Eventually they turned their states into dictatorships, and ultimately they tried to turn them into “republican monarchies” (Jumlukiyya) in which the father transfers power to his son. In Syria this was accomplished successfully when Hafiz al-Asad passed on his power to his son Bashar, but in Egypt the move was nipped in the bud with the eruption of the January 25, 2011 revolution.

The Syrian and Egyptian regimes were perceived, for the most part, as strong, stable, and immune to any danger. Even their opponents were compelled to admit that the chances of bringing about a change and overthrowing the regimes were close to nil. Indeed, writing in late 2010, Syrian intellectual, Burhan Ghalioun, expressed skepticism about the possibility of Syrian society bringing about internal change that would lead to the fall of the Asad dynasty. Ghalioun’s point must be acknowledged: the stability and power of the Syrian and Egyptian regimes have always stood in the shadow of the inherent weakness of their societies. This weakness was and is rooted in the intractable social and economic problems of poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, and lack of economic growth, which has only grown worse over the years, and dragged the two countries further and further backward. Political strength and stability, on the one hand, and social and economic backwardness, on the

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3 Ghalioun later became the first chairman of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was the first organization formed to lead the Syrian revolution.