Urban Stratification as a Basis for Analyzing Political Instability: Evidence from Syrian Cities

Authors : Munqeth Othman Agha

Abstract : The historical formation of urban centres in the eastern Arab world was shaped by rapid urbanization and sudden transformation from the age of the pre-industrial to a post-industrial economy, coupled with uneven development, informal urban expansion, and constant surges in unemployment and poverty rates. The city was stratified accordingly as overlapping layers of division and inequality that have been built on top of each other, creating complex horizontal and vertical divisions based on economic, social, political, and ethno-sectarian basis. This has been further exacerbated during the neoliberal era, which transferred the city into a sort of dual city that is inhabited by heterogeneous and often antagonistic social groups. Economic deprivation combined with a growing sense of marginalization and inequality across the city planted the seeds of political instability, outbreaking in 2011. Unlike other popular uprisings that occupy central squares, as in Egypt and Tunisia, the Syrian uprising in 2011 took place mainly within inner streets and neighborhood squares, mobilizing primarily on more or less upon the lines of stratification. This has emphasized the role of micro-urban and social settings in shaping mobilization and resistance tactics, which necessitates us to understand the way the city was stratified and place it at the center of the city-conflict nexus analysis. This research aims to understand to what extent pre-conflict urban stratification lines played a role in determining the different trajectories of three cities' neighborhoods (Homs, Dara'a and Deir-ez-Zor). The main argument of the paper is that the way the Syrian city has been stratified creates various social groups within the city who have enjoyed different levels of accessibility to life chances, material resources and social statuses. This determines their relationship with other social groups in the city and, more importantly, their relationship with the state. The advent of a political opportunity will be depicted differently across the city's different social groups according to their perceived interests and threats, which consequently leads to either political mobilization or demobilization. Several factors, including the type of social structures, built environment, and state response, determine the ability of social actors to transfer the repertoire of contention to collective action or transfer from social actors to political actors. The research uses urban stratification lines as the basis for understanding the different patterns of political upheavals in urban areas while explaining why neighborhoods with different social and urban environment settings had different abilities and capacities to mobilize, resist state repression and then descend into a military conflict. It particularly traces the transformation from social groups to social actors and political actors by applying the Explaining-outcome Process-Tracing method to depict the causal mechanisms that led to including or excluding different neighborhoods from each stage of the uprising, namely mobilization (M1), response (M2), and control (M3).