

From Reform to Revolt: Bashar al-Assad and the Arab Tribes in Syria

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Abstract : The death of Hafez al-Assad and the ascension of his son, Bashar, to rule brought an end to the state-society dynamics that his father worked on for decades. Hafez al-Assad built an authoritarian state that rests on patronage networks that connected his regime to the society. During Bashar's reign, these patronage relationships have been affected by the policies of privatization and liberalization. Privatization and liberalisation of the economy have created new economic and social players that transformed the populist nature of the authoritarian regime into a regime that is connected mainly with bourgeoisie and the upper class neglecting the rural tribal constituency that was a vital part of Hafez al-Assad's authoritarian state. Drawing on different data gathered through interviews as well as written literature, this paper will explore the policies that Bashar al-Assad carried out towards the Arab tribes in the period extended from 2000 until 2010. The paper starts by outlining how Bashar al-Assad narrowed the coalition of his rule to depend mainly on his family, the city merchants excluding the lower and middle strata in the periphery. It will then trace the disintegration of the social contract between the regime and the Arab tribe as a result of the latter's failure to deliver adequate development services in their regions. Losing the support of the tribes undermined the stability of the regime resulting in different clashes between the tribes themselves, the tribes and the Kurds, the tribes and the druze (a sect of Islam situated in Southern Syria), which will be investigated in detail in this paper. In similar policies adopted by his father who used the tribes as leverage against the Islamists and the Kurds, Bashar al-Assad's regime encouragement of Syrian tribal youth to join the Iraqi insurgency against the Americans will be explored in detail. The regime's tolerance of Iran missionary activities in the tribal regions and its accommodation of Islamists group's activities in those regions have erased the regime's secular foundation. This paper will argue that Bashar al-Assad's policies towards the Arab tribes have chipped away the regime's ideological pillars and threatened the longer-term cohesion of its social base which paved the way for the uprising to start in the tribal regions.

Keywords : Syria, tribes, uprising, regime

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