Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression

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Reviewed by Elizabeth R. Nugent, Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA (enugent@princeton.edu)

How Syria's 2011 uprising quickly descended into civil war, with devastating consequences far beyond the state's borders, is one of the most important questions arising from the long decade following the Arab Spring. In *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression*, Kevin Mazur details how the largely peaceful revolutionary challenge became violent and did so along ethnic lines. The book's main argument is that a combination of the incumbent regime's prerevolutionary ties to society and its use of violence created the conditions for violent ethnic contention.

In making his argument, Mazur pushes back against a simple ethnic explanation, in which a civil war fought along ethnic lines results from exclusive ethnic rule (in Syria, against the Sunni majority) by a regime dominated by an ethnic minority group (the ʿAlawites). Instead, Mazur argues that the regime's approach to securing and maintaining political control better approximated a "patchwork" of state–society connections, including public employment, programmatic social spending, and personal deals between the regime and ethnic leaders. Chapter 3 convincingly documents the complicated reality before the uprising. Although ʿAlawites on average had far greater access to state resources than members of other ethnic groups, the Asad regime also maintained numerous cross-ethnic linkages with important segments of the Sunni population, including business elites, urban professional populations, and other local community notables, particularly in the country's peripheral geographic areas.

The Asad regime's patchwork approach has two important consequences that are central to Mazur's explanation for the shift from nonviolent, nonethnic contestation to violent, ethnicized conflict. First, patchwork state–society relations create grievances among individuals from many groups, and as a result the initial mobilization in a revolutionary situation against an ethnically dominated regime will be diverse, as was the case in the early days of the Syrian uprising. Second, patchwork governance creates only weak or sparse ties to wide swathes of the population. Violence, therefore, became the only tactic available to the regime to quell mass mobilization, because the regime had neither the resources nor the networks to demobilize the population in other ways. Regime violence, in turn, ethnicized the conflict through a number of reinforcing mechanisms: by heightening the local and ethnic identities targeted by violence, shrinking the scope of claims (from national and citizen-based to demands more specifically defined by ethnic groups), and shattering the precarious structures that linked non–co-ethnic groups with the regime.

The book's rich narrative relies on a wealth of original evidence on the Syrian uprising and civil war drawn from Arabic-language interviews, primary sources, and secondary materials. Due to the nature of the conflict at the time of research, the author's fifteen months of fieldwork were conducted in Amman, Beirut, Istanbul, and the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where millions of Syrians had been displaced because of the civil war. Mazur notes that he developed insights from more formal, semistructured interviews and informal interactions and conversations with Syrian interlocutors. In addition, Mazur provides fine-grained insights into patterns of protest mobilization and the onset and escalation of violence at the town level through an original database combining census data with town characteristics, contentious events, and challenger fatalities. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are fascinating, full of minute detail documenting the sequence of events and patterns of contention during

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the early days of the uprising that are illuminating and clarifying, even for those who closely followed this period.

Scholars might build on Mazur's important contribution in two ways, both of which are related to the implications and generalizability of the Asad regime's prerevolutionary patchwork approach to state–society relations. First, it is unclear whether the diversity of Syria's initial mobilization looked significantly different than that in other revolutionary and Arab Spring contexts. The success of mobilization to achieve a revolutionary situation with competing centers of sovereignty requires a negative coalition, defined as multiple groups from different walks of life united in their common rejection of the ruling regime but often little else. In other work on the Arab Spring, Mazur and coauthors demonstrated that this pattern held in Egypt and Tunisia, with interesting demographic variation explained by prerevolutionary state–society relations.[1] A reader of Mazur's article alongside his book might wonder what, if anything, was different about the negative coalition in Syria's early mobilization, and whether and how the patchwork state–society approach helps to explain why this coalition looked different from other contexts.

Relatedly, it also is possible that the necessity of a negative coalition to achieve a revolutionary situation undermines the puzzle Mazur puts forward to motivate his inquiry, that "early protests prominently featured members of all the country's ethnic groups" (p. 1) and not just the excluded majority group. Perhaps the Syrian conflict did not originally appear to be ethnic because of the negative coalition. However, in taking a longer view, it is clear that ethnic contestation was a defining feature of Syrian politics before the revolution. Mazur himself documents in Chapter 3 injustices that were ethnic in nature prior to 2011, in agreement with scholars like Raymond Hinnebusch who argued that neoliberal reforms rendered sectarian divides more salient prior to the revolution and so were important dimensions of contestation and mechanisms of control under the prerevolutionary Asad regime. In this reading, the widespread initial mobilization is the anomalous moment to be explained, whereas the civil war essentially reverts to Syrian politics as usual, contested along the ethnic lines through which the regime rewarded and divided its population, although this time with significantly more violence.

Second, the Syrian regime was not alone in its use of violence in response to the uprisings; nearly all regimes responded to the unprecedented mass mobilization during the Arab Spring with repression. Many of these regimes were not ethnically exclusive, but rather divided along other dimensions of contestation. It is unclear whether the regime's patchwork state–society relations give us additional purchase on understanding regime violence against protesters or if violence is simply the only response available to regimes of all types under mass siege.

In *Revolution in Syria,* Mazur contributes an authoritative account of how both the legacies of the Asad regime's approach to political control prior to the uprising as well as its contingent decisions during pivotal moments of contention during the uprising transformed protest mobilization into civil war. The entire book is a necessary read for those interested in Syrian politics, contention during the Arab Spring, and processes of revolutionary mobilization. It is accessible for undergraduate and graduate seminars on these topics; chapters 4 and 8, in particular, may be useful assignments for clarifying the time line of events from the onset of protests to the escalation of violence and developments since 2012. The book also would be a nice addition to seminars on ethnic conflict and civil war for in-depth focus on an important contemporary case.

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[1] Mark R. Beissinger, Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur, "Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015), 1–21.