

Syria Under al-Assad Rule: A Case of Neopatrimonial Regime

Abstract

This paper aims to conceptualize the Syrian regime under the rule of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad (1970-2011) as a neopatrimonial regime. The paper claims that the neopatrimonial domination of the Assad regime bases on three pillars; the personalization of the regime, the patronage networks and the clientelism. Under the subtitle of personalization the Syrian regime, the paper tries to lay down the historical process and mechanisms used to personalized the regime under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, through using the personal clique and the imposed personal cult. Following, the paper figures out the dual patronage networks that the Assad regime has utilized to consolidate his personal domination through penetrate the bureaucratic realm and the society; the Alawite patronage and the Baath Party patronage. In the same context, the paper evaluates the clientelism as another mechanism functions in the patrimonial penetration processes, mainly in the economic domain, and the changes that took place in this regard under Bashar al-Assad's rule.

Bilal Salaymeh

is a PhD student in International Relations at METU & a research assistant at the SETA Foundation Foreign Policy Research Department.

Keywords: Assad Regime, Neopatrimonialism, Political Cult, Patronage Relations, Clientalism

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“NEOPATRİMONYAL BİR REJİM ÖRNEĞİ: ESED YÖNETİMİNDEKİ SURIYE”

Öz

Bu makale, Hafez ve Başar Esed yönetimindeki Suriye rejimini (1970-2011) neopatrimonial bir rejim olarak kavramlaştmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, Esad rejiminin neopatrimonial egemenliğinin üç sütün üzerine kurulu olduğunu iddia ediyor; rejimin kişiselleştirilmesi, patronaj ağları ve klientalizm. Esed yönetiminin kişiselleştirilmesi alt başlığı altında makale, Hafez ve Başar Esed'in yönetimi sürecince, kişisel klik ve empoze edilen kişisel kült üzerinden rejimin kişiselleştirilmesinin tarihi sürecini ve kullanılan mekanizmaları incelemeye çalışmaktadır. Bundan sonra makale, Esed rejiminin bürokratik ve toplumsal alanlarına nüfuz ederek tâhakkümünü sağlamlaştırmak için başvurduğu ikili patronaj ağları ortaya koymakta; Alevi ve Baas Partisi'nin patronaj ağları. Aynı bağlamda makale, başta ekonomik alanda olmak üzere, patrimonial tâhakkümü ve nüfuz etme süreci için kullanılan klientalism mekanizelerini ve bu mekanizmalarının Başar Esed'in yönetiminde geçirdiği değişikleri değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Esed rejimi, Neopatrimonializm, Siyasi Kült, Patronaj İlişkileri, Klientalism

سوريا تحت حكم الأسد: مثال عن الأنظمة الباترومونية الجديدة

ملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى تأطير النظام السوري مفاهيمياً تحت حكم حافظ وبشار الأسد (1970-2011) كنظام باتروموني جديد. حيث تدعى المقالة أن نظام الأسد يستند على ثلاثة دعائم رئيسية: شخصنة النظام، شبكات الحماية والمحسوبية والزبائنية السياسية. تحت عنوان شخصنة للنظام السوري، تحاول المقالة تحليل السياق التاريخي والآليات المستخدمة لشخصنة النظام في عهد حافظ وبشار الأسد، وذلك بالاعتماد على دور الزمرة الشخصية وفرض عبادة الشخصية السياسية للأسد. بعد ذلك، تستعرض الورقة شبكات الحماية والمحسوبية المزدوجة التي استخدمها نظام الأسد لتوطيد هيمنته الشخصية من خلال اختراق المجال البiero-قراطي والمجتمع: شبكات الحماية والمحسوبية العلوية من جهة والحزبية لحزب البعث من جهة أخرى. في السياق نفسه، تقوم الورقة بتقدير الزبائنية السياسية كآلية أخرى في عمليات الاختراق الباتروموني، خاصة في المجال الاقتصادي، والتغيرات التي جرت في هذا الشأن في ظل حكم بشار الأسد.

كلمات مفتاحية: نظام الأسد، الباترومونية الجديدة، شبكات الحماية والمحسوبية، الزبائنية السياسية.

The Syrian regime under Hafez and his son Bashar al-Assad (1970-2011), which consolidated itself through a long historical process, enjoys several features which make it best to be described as a neopatrimonial regime. The founder of this neopatrimonial regime is without doubt Hafez al-Assad¹, who grabbed the power after a series of intra junta purges ending with the 1970 coup. The regime whose milestones and domination mechanism was laid down by al-Assad the father, was smoothly handed to his son Bashar, who succeeded to power following his father's death. Bashar has continued to rule through the neopatrimonial mechanisms.

The neopatrimonial typology is a modern adaptation of Weberian patrimonial ruling type, which belongs to the realm of authoritarian regimes. It represents a mixture of two types of domination that co-exist: namely, patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination. The neopatrimonialism takes place when the patrimonial relation penetrates the bureaucratic domain, through the mechanisms of patronage and clientelism in aim to control it in the interest of the patrimon. Thus, clientelism and patronage relations are sine qua non for realizing the neopatrimonialism.

Weber had mentioned patrimonialism as one of three pure types of domination, emphasizing the role of personal rule in this type of domination². Later Eisenstadt³ modifies the concept to include both Weberian traditional patrimonialism and 'neo' rational-bureaucratic domination. Peter Pawelka⁴ argues that there would be two bases of legitimization of neopatrimonial regimes. In additional to the traditional loyalty (like heritage), Pawelka argued for the martial reward (allocation of jobs and grants ...etc.) are bases for legitimization of neopatrimonial regimes. This argument has paved the way for other scholars like Medard⁵, Bratton & Van de Walle⁶, Gero

¹ In this paper, *al-Assad* will be used, as it is pronounced in the Arabic origin, to refer to the name of the family, hence, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad, al-Assad Family, will be written as such. However, in consistent with the general usage in the academia and media, *The Assad regime* will be used to refer to the regime of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad.

² Guenther Roth and Ckus Wittich (ed.), *Max Weber, Economy and Society: An outline of Interpretive Sociology*. (Berkeley, California, USA: University of California Press, 1978).

³ Samuel N. Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism*. (London: Sage Publication, 1973)

⁴ Peter Pawelka, *Herrschaft und Entwicklung im Nahen Osten: Ägypten*. (Heidelberg: C.F.Müller: 1985)

⁵ Jean Francois Medard, "Patrimonialism, Neo-patrimonialism and the Study of the Post-colonial State in Subsaharan Africa", *International Development Studies* No. 17 (1996): 76-97.

⁶ Michael Bratton & Nicholas Van de Walle. *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Erdmann & Ulf Engel⁷, and Bach⁸, to address the role of clientelism and patronage relations in constructing neopatrimonial regimes. Thus, in addition to the personal patrimonial power, clientelism and patronage started to be seen as a *sine qua non* for the neopatrimonial regimes through which patrimonial power is able to penetrate the state and the society and thereby maintain its personal control.

In the core of Assad's neopatrimonial domination exists the role of the patrimonialism, which implies the personalization of the regime and the state's apparatus altogether. This patrimonialism was constructed and consolidated through the personal control of the security apparatus by appealing to the inner circle of security elites and officials, who formed a loyal clique around al-Assad. And with the constructing of Assad's personal cult, through cultish rituals, which have been regarded as a proof of loyalty to the patron.

The second milestone of Assad's neopatrimonial regime was the role of patronage relations and networks. The patronage relations although associated closely with clientelism, differs in its operating methods and structure. The patronage relation is a vertical one, in which the patron sits on the top of the chain. It applies to high-politics targeting a social group. These patronage relations and networks have been realized in the neopatrimonial Assad regime through Alawite patronage and Baath Party Patronage.

On the other hand, clientelism, which represents the third milestone of the neopatrimonial Assad regime, implies a dyadic relationship between the individual, who in this situation is the client, and the patron who is the ruler. Thus, the relation is horizontal when comparing to the vertical structure of the patronage relations. It is also an open and transitive relation applying to everyone from the society, so being a client is a potentiality for every citizen, who in his turn could be a patron for other citizens. In contrast, patronage relations seem to be narrower and enjoyed by one social or political group. The clientelism in the Syrian case has existed side by side with patronage relations. However, it was manifested more in the economic domain, which was organized through clientelism, at least in Hafez al-Assad's time.

⁷ Gero Erdmann & Ulf Engel. "Neopatrimonialism Revisited: Beyond a Catch-All Concept". *GIGA Working Paper*, No. 16 (2006),

⁸ Daniel C. Bach. "Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism: Comparative Trajectories and Readings", *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 49, No. 3 (2011): 275–294.

The Shortages of other Conceptualizations

Plenty of conceptualizations and theoretical frameworks have been applied to analyze the Assad regime. Agreeing on the role of Assad's personalism and the authoritarian aspect of the regime, scholars have offered various approaches either prioritizing or undermining the role of one of the regime's components. Some have focused on the role of the Baath Party and the populist aspect of the regime, others have shed light on the role of the Alawite community and sectarian politics in the consolidation of Assad's regime.

One of the scholars known to study the Syrian regime is Nikolas Van Dam. Van Dam, who prioritized the role of the Alawite community, argues in his famous book *The Struggle for Power in Syria* that the Assad regime is under 'Alawite dominated Baath Rule'⁹. A nearly identical viewpoint is endorsed by Eyal Zisser, who claims that Assad's regime has a clear sectarian nature and depends on the support of the Alawite community,¹⁰ the nature which Zisser argues to be the reason behinds the regimes success and survival. Yet, Zisser himself said later that one of the main factors of Assad's success in ruling Syria is the composition of the ruling coalition, under which he even argues that the Assad regime [Hafez al-Assad] 'successfully reflected a coalition of social and political forces that represented most of Syrian society'¹¹. Even Van Dam seems to revise this claim regarding the Alawite domination in his later book,¹² by arguing that there was an overlapping between the sectarian and social background which might affect the perception that the Assad regime was prioritizing and recruiting intensively from the Alawite's community.

Raymond Hinnebusch, a well-known scholar in Syrian Studies, argues that the key concept which gives the most adequate insight into the rise, durability and nature of the Ba'ath's role is authoritarian-populism.¹³ However, the labelling of the Syrian regime as 'authoritarian-populist' seems to undermine other factors like the over-representation of the Alawite community in the security apparatuses under the Syrian regime. It seems that the rule of the minority, in consolidating the Assad

⁹ Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁰ Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*. (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2001)

¹¹ Eyal Zisser, *Comanding Syria: Bashar Al-Assad and the First Years in Power* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), s. 9.

¹² Nikolas Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation, The Civil War in Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

¹³ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria* (Boulder: Westview Press., 1990), s. 1-2.

regime (Alawite community in Syria) was neglected by Hinnebusch. His argument does not address the point that the dominant class with which the post-1963 regime in Syria aimed to establish an authority autonomous from is the previously dominant Sunni class, which constitutes the majority of the Syrian population, is the Alawite denomination. In other words, this means that the Baath regime, either willingly or not, launched a silent confrontation against the Sunni dominant political elite, who existed mainly in the major Syrian urban cities. As Ziyadeh argues, '[after 1966], this was chapter in which the countryside predominated over the city, the minority over a fragile mix between the majority and the minorities'¹⁴. This shifting in the ruling elite in Syria resulted in social dynamics that came with a sectarian flavor, which started to arise in the Syrian society in the form of more fragmentation and social clashing. Moreover, the populist-authoritarian typology supposes that the aim of the regime is to establish a strong autonomous state, yet it does not address the personal motivation behind the consolidation of the state and its apparatus. Furthermore, these populist policies retreated after Bashar seized power in 2000, whereby Bashar has launched a campaign to liberalize the economy and to adopt a more open market economy.¹⁵

Hinnebusch, referring to Heydemann's conceptualization of 'authoritarianism upgrading'¹⁶ (AU), has elaborated the change in the authoritarian regime by arguing that 'the underlying deep change was a movement from an originally populist form of authoritarianism to "post-populist" (neo-liberal versions)', Hinnebusch defines 'post-populism' as a 'strategic shift in the political economy of regimes towards including new crony capitalists and excluding regimes' former populist constituencies'.¹⁷ Hinnebusch applies the idea of AU in Syria during Bashar's era through what he calls post-populism authoritarianism (PPA).¹⁸

Although these arguments of AU and PPA address the changes in the Assad regime and other similar cases, they focus on the politico-economic and external factors behind these changes, while seem to undermine the self-driven dimension

¹⁴ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria*. (New York: I.B. Tauris 2011), s. 12.

¹⁵ Muhammed Jamal Barout, *al-Aked al-Akhir fi Tarih Suriye, Jadalyet al-Jumoud w'al-Islah* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012), s. 58-59.

¹⁶ Steven Heydemann. "Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World" *Analysis Paper, the Saban Forum for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution*, No. 39 (2007).

¹⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Resilience and the Arab Uprising: Syria in Comparative Perspective" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (July, 2015): s. 19.

¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

of the neo-patrimonial domination. Following its patrimonialization of the political and the social domains, neo-patrimonial domination continues to expand by deepening its patrimonial power vertically and spreading its control horizontally via its clients. Thereby, it should not be expected that neo-patrimonial domination should stop its expansion and refrain from penetrating the economic society. Patrimonializing the economic society would also be demanded by the patron's clients as well, who would search for new sources of revenue through liberalization of the economy and the economic public sector.

On the other hand, some academics went further to argue that the Syrian regime, mainly under Hafiz al-Assad, has represented an example of a sultanistic regime¹⁹, however, examining the characteristics of the Syrian regime reveals that despite its sultanistic features, like personalism, it has failed to represent a fully sultanistic regime.

The complexity of the Syrian regime was admitted by Hinnebusch, who argued, that 'In the Syrian case, the outcome is, in fact, typically ambiguous' adding that 'despite attaining a certain ideological legitimacy, the failure to establish a cohesive center led to resort to patrimonial techniques resulting in Presidential Monarchy which shares power with military and bureaucratic elites and party institution'.²⁰ Thus, it seems that the patrimonial characteristic that Syrian regime enjoys has forced Hinnebusch himself to later label the regime as 'partly bureaucratic, partly patrimonial: a virtual "Presidential Monarchy."'²¹ Volker Perthes in his book 'The Political Economy of Syria under Assad', also argues that the 'personal role of Assad has been secured by the deliberate employment of patrimonial instruments such as, personal loyalty and patronage'. He also emphasizes the role of clientelistic networks²².

The mixed regime which Hinnebusch and Perthes argues to be the case in Syria, is almost the same that Erdmann and Engel argued to exist in the neopatrimonial regime, in which patrimonial domination coexists with bureaucratic domination²³.

¹⁹ Alan Siaroff, *Comparing Political Regimes, a Thematic Introduction to Comparative Politics*, (Canada: Broadview Press, 2005), s. 215.

²⁰ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria*, (Boulder: Westview Press., 1990), s.12.

²¹ Raymon A. Hinnebusch, *Syria Revolution from Above*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2001), s. 5.

²² Ibid, s. 180.

²³ Erdmann & Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Revisited: Beyond a Catch-All Concept"

Hence, we can argue that the patrimonialistic characteristic of the Syrian regime has existed from the early beginning. Yet it was not a pure case of patrimonialism, rather a case of neopatrimonialism.

The Neopatrimonialism of the Assad Regime

The neopatrimonialism of the Syrian regime stands on three pillars which characterize the regime under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad; the personalism of the regime through the role of Assad's clique and Assad's cult, the role of patronage relations through Alawite and Baath Party patronage, and the role of clientelist relations.

The Personalization of the Syrian Regime: *Suriyet'ul Assad*

Personalism of the regime and the state apparatuses lays in the center of patriarchal and neopatrimonial regimes, around which other controlling mechanisms that the patron uses to penetrate the state bureaucracy through patronage and clientelism relations are centralized. Through personalism, domination develops 'an administration and a military force which are purely personal instrument of the master' as Weber argues.²⁴

This constructive process of personalized patrimonial power has been in going since Hafez seized power, and continued in his son Bashar's era. It is a complex process in which many social and political factors play a role, yet we can identify two main mechanisms that had been used in the consolidation and embodiment of power in the persona of Assad, the patron; Assad's clique and Assad's cult.

Hafez Assad was able to control the security apparatuses and thus the state altogether and linked it to his own persona through his clique of loyalists. The tight control of the state was assured by close censorship, absolute supervision and the atmosphere of fear secured by the iron fist of the clique controlling the security apparatus. This tightly personalized control of the state went in parallel with the constructing of Assad's cult. Using political symbolism under the sphere of fear, the political cult aimed to construct an emotional connection between the patron and his followers. These mechanisms continue also under his son Bashar's rule. The personalized patrimonial power in Syria, which has been constructed through personalized tight control of the state apparatus spreading fear and building a po-

²⁴ Guenther Roth and Ckus Wittich (ed.), *Max Weber, Economy and Society; An outline of Interpretive Sociology*. (Berkeley, California, USA: University of California Press,1978).

litical cult, resulted in making Syria to be called as, *Suriyet'ul Assad* - Assad's Syria.²⁵

Assad's Clique

In the core of Hafez Assad's effort to consolidate his patrimonial personalized power, lays the role of the clique. This clique is a closed group of officials whose loyalty and blind obedience to the patron, Assad, was unquestionable. The clique members, who submitted directly to Assad himself, were responsible of maintaining tight control of the state apparatus and in particular the security apparatuses and the army. Thereby they maintained Assad's personal control.

In general, it could be argued that this clique, which constitutes the inner circle of ruling elite, and which the loyalty to the patron is the sine quo non charactersitic of its members, had comprised mainly of three categories; al-Assad's family members and relatives, who share kinship with al-Assad; loyal security and army elites, many of whom were co-sects or old friends of al-Assad; loyal bureaucrats and statesmen, who were members of the Baath Party. These three categories could be considered as constitutive of hierarchical layers as well.

The first category of clique membership is the family members, whose linkage to the patron is based on kinship relations. One of the early signs of the increasing role of kinship relations in the Syrian regime is exemplified by the remarkable role played by Hafez's al-Assad younger brother Rifaat Assad in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rifaat was the commander of the Defense Companies (Saraya al-Difaa'), the praetorian guard which played a substantial role during suppressing of the Islamic Insurgency 1979-1982. Another examples were that of Adnan al-Assad, who controlled the 'Struggle Companies' and Gen. Adnan Makhlouf, a cousin of Bashar's mother (Anisah Makhlouf), who commanded the strong, well-equipped Republican Guard.²⁶

This kinship relation-based prioritizing intersects with the policy of inheritance, in which patrimonial power is transmitted from the father to the son. In the 1990s, with Hafez al-Assad's illness becoming more severe, the way had been paved for

²⁵ *Suriyet'ul Assad* Assad's Syria, is an idiom widely used by al-Assad's loyalists and adopted by the loyal media. The idiom attaches Syria to al-Assad family manifesting the patrimonial and even arguably the sultanistic nature Syria under the Assad regime.

²⁶ Gary C. Gambill. Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, "The Assad Family and the Succession in Syria". https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0007_s2.htm. (accessed May, 1 2018)

his elderly son Basel. Yet Basel passed away in a car accident in 1994, which paved the way to his younger brother Bashar. Not only Basel and Bashar, but also Hafez's third son, Maher, has been playing an important role in the army, particularly in commanding the Syrian Army's elite 5th Brigade.

This role of the first category the clique members continued under Bashar's era. Moreover, arguably the role of the family and kinship relations in forming this clique has increased under Bashar. Many relatives of Bashar outside of his immediate family occupy important positions in the regime. In addition to his brother Maher, who is said to play an important role in the army and particularly as the commander of the Republican Guard and the army's elite Fourth Armored Division, Bashar's brother in law, Assef Shawkat, his sister Bushra's husband, had occupied important positions like the Head of Military Intelligence, Deputy Chief of Staff, and Deputy Minister of Defense until his mysterious death. Another outstanding example was Atef Najib, Bashar's cousin, who was the head of the Political Security Directorate in Daraa, the cradle of the Syrian uprising, and the person who is said to be responsible of the inflammation of the uprising, by his reckless handling of the crisis in its early stages. Furthermore, the role of relatives in Bashar's rule has not been limited to the bureaucratic and security domain, it also extended to the economic domain, as exemplified by the significant role of his cousin Rami Makhlouf.

The second category of the clique membership is the loyal security and army elites. Even though Alawite members were overrepresented in this group, many Sunnis have found their seats in the clique as well. Among this category, we can name Muhammed al-Khuli, the Chief of Air Force Intelligence 1970-1987 and the Chief of Air Force 1994-1999, and Ali Duba, the Chief of the Military Intelligence 1974-2000, who were both Alawites. Non-Alawite members also existed like; Mustapha Talas, Assad's only Defense Minister; Naji Jamil, a Sunni from Dayr al-Zur who commanded the Syrian Air Force from November 1970 until March 1978; and Hikmet al-Shihabi, Assad's Chief of Staff. However, it is important to state here that "officer such as Talas, Jamil [Naji Jamil] and Shakkur [Major General Yusuf Shukkur, a Greek Orthodox Christian, succeeded Mustapha Talas as chief of staff in 1972] were able to exercise considerable power so long as they followed the president's policies"²⁷.

²⁷ Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, s. 69

The third category of the clique was comprised of the bureaucrats, or the face of the regime. Here, Sunni officials were represented more. Names like, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, former vice-president, and Faruk ash-Shar, former foreign minister and vice president, Abdullah al-Ahmar, Hafez al-Assad's Assistant Secretary General of the National Command of the Baath Party are among the members of this category. We can add to this category all the Syrian Prime Ministers under Hafez and Bashar who were all Sunnis. However, the power of this category and their weight in the clique is relatively low, simply because their power depends only on the consent of the patron and lack any power base, in contrast to the members of the second category, who are in turn inferior to the members of the first category who are prioritized due to their kinship relations with the patron and their direct access to power.

The clique has shown continuity, as the power structure of the regime (especially during the thirty years of Hafez's role) did not change to a large extent. This continuity means that this clique has also stayed loyal to the patron. In Hafez's time, apart from the instance of Rifat's coup attempt, the clique seems to have maintained its structure. It also continued to function during Bashar's first years, as Zisser argues 'the elite of Assad's era [Hafez al-Assad's era] essentially remained in place during the first years of Bashar's rule²⁸ and the clique was claimed to have an important role in guaranteeing the smooth transition of power.

The Assad regime was able to guarantee the blind obedience and total submission of the state apparatuses to the patrimonial power through the clique which tightly controlled the security apparatuses. For example, the army and military officers were tamed, firstly by the purges that took place in the regime's early years, and later through close monitoring of the officers through the Military and Air Force Intelligence Directorates which were controlled by clique members who linked directly to the patron. Thus, the army, as well as security apparatus, were fully personalized ending with what Weber had called 'patrimonial troops'. Thereby, they show no hesitation in cracking down on any uprising facing the patrimonial regime, either in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood or in the 2011 uprising.

²⁸ Eyal Zisser, *Compadding Syria: Bashar Al-Assad and the First Years in Power*, s. 63.

Assad's Cult of Personality

The second main mechanism in securing the personalization of the Syrian regime in the persona of Assad, is the constructing of Assad's political cult. While the role of the clique is limited to guarantee the personalized tight control and supervision of the state apparatus in an iron fist that spread the atmosphere of fear, the political cult was instrumentalized to construct the persona of Assad as the patron of the state in the public domain and ideational realm.

In this process of constructing the image of Assad as the patron of the state, various social and political tools have been used. The controlled media and public domain have been bombed with official and semi-official rhetoric, political symbols, public messages in a state-sponsored ongoing campaign aiming to incarnate the patron, Assad, in the public image.

The politics of symbolism is one of the three dimensions of the ruler's strategies of legitimization in neopatrimonial regimes according to Bank and Richter. In their paper, they define the politics of symbolism as looking at the "immaterial aspects of culture, identity and discourse", adding that "in this way adding new aspects to the classic 'Weberian' categories of charisma and tradition that were already – at least partially – included in the earlier, traditional understanding of neopatrimonialism"²⁹. One of the best and rare academicians who address the role of cult and political symbolism in the consolidation of Assad's authority in Syria was Lisa Wedeen, who argues in her book *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* that "Assad's cult is a strategy of domination based in compliance rather than legitimacy"³⁰.

The construction of the Assad cult was a long and accumulative process that started from the early years of Hafez Assad's position. Patrick Seale, Assad's biographer, claims that the inventor of Assad's cult was Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, Assad's Minister of Information 1974-1983.³¹ However, Wedeen cited that Yahya Sadowski arguing that the "exaggerated homage of Hafez Assad began within the confines of the popular organizations as part of the party's overall glorification of

²⁹ Andre Bank & Thomas Richter, "Neopatrimonialism in the Middle East and North Africa, Overview, Critique and Alternative Conceptualization", *Neopatrimonialism in Various World Regions*, s. 8.

³⁰ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), s. 6.

³¹ Patrick Seale, *Assad of Syria, the Struggle for the Middle East*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), s. 339.

Baathist achievement, and became part of a strategy to rally mass appeal beginning in 1982³². By the 1990s, Assad's cult was clearly manifest in the fact that tens of works have been published in Damascus on the Syrian president, all of them eulogies.³³

The first statue of Assad in Damascus was erected at the Assad library in 1984. In the following years, the statues of Hafez al-Assad were to be erected in the entrance of almost every Syrian city and in the middle of public parks, while his portrait was to be hanged in every classroom and public office, and on every street corner. Hafez Assad was to become omnipresent. By the mid-1980s, Hafez al-Assad started to be referred to using extreme patrimonial phrases like; *al-Ab al-Kae'd* The Commanding Father³⁴, and *Sayyed al-Watan* The Lord of the Homeland. Among the other titles that were given to Hafez al-Assad; *al-Rafiq al-Kae'd* The Comrade Commander, *al-Kae'd al-Ramz* The Commanding Symbol, *Batel al-Harb wal-Salam* The Hero of the War and the Peace. This omnipresence interestingly has continued even after his death in 2000, following his death the state media started to call Hafez al-Assad, *al-Ka'ed al-Khalid* The Immortal Leader.

The role mentioned by Sadowski of the popular organizations and the Baath Party in constructing the cult was vital³⁵. These organizations were used as channels to impose the patrimonial image on the public, mainly the students, and were instrumentalized to fulfill the rituals of Assad's political cult in the public domain. The fulfillment of Assad's political cult in the public domain was to be realized under the iron fist of the clique-controlled security apparatuses. This iron fist has forced the people either believing in Assad's cult or not to practice it. This situation was described by Wedeen by saying that people were acting 'as if'. For instance, state employees were taken by public buses to the polls to give the *bay'ah*³⁶ to *al-Ab al-Ka'ed*, and whoever hesitates or opposes would be put under investigation by the security apparatuses. A noteworthy point is that since the mid-1980s, the political motto that dominated the reelection campaigns of Hafez Assad was *Ila al-Abad Ila al-Abad Ya Hafez al-Assad*' - Forever, Forever, Oh Hafez al-Assad.

³² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, s. 33.

³³ Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, s. 144.

³⁴ Yasin Haj Saleh, *Al-Thawra Al-Mustahila*. (Bairut: Al Mu'assase Al-Arabiya Lildirasat Wal-Nasher, 2017), s. 75.

³⁵ This role which will be discussed in details in the Baath Patronage part.

³⁶ *Bay'ah* originally an Islamic terminology, means to give the oath of allegiance to a leader. Yet it was used in Syria since mid 1980s to describe the reelection of Assad to presidency.

An important notion to highlight in the process of constructing Assad's cult is that this cult was not limited to his own persona, yet it extended to include other family members. Wedeen has also shed light on this notion. She states that "Assad shares the iconographic landscape with other heroes. Assad's family members, most specifically his mother, his deceased son Basel, his son Bashar ... also appear periodically in the state's symbolic displays"³⁷. The construction of the political cult of Hafez al-Assad's family has paved the way for Bashar, to establish his own cult when he proceeded to power. By 1996, laminated pictures, buttons, and other paraphernalia regularly showed Assad flanked by his own sons. Sometimes the three are dressed in military fatigues, signifying that the young doctor, like his dead brother and aging father, has the requisite military fatigues³⁸. Thus, the constructing process of Bashar's cult had started even before he took power.

Following Bashar's rise to power, the traditional of the political cult continued to take place in the public life. The image of Assad distributed during the 2007 Arab League Summit in Riyadh was captioned the '*Gaze of the Lions*'. It was displayed in the windows of Syrian cars as a sign of loyalty, and also as a way of gaining privileges such as being exempted from traffic fines. In the same year, during the next referendum, the "*We Love You*" campaign was carried out. It suggested blind loyalty and more closely resembled the propaganda of Hafez Al-Assad's rule. The propaganda was paid for by the close circle of businessmen who became faithful economic sponsors of the Assad family.³⁹

The political cult in Syria under both Hafez and Bashar, has been a socially constructed process under the supervision of the state. Thus, it became a kind of official ritual. Students in Hafez's time, through their morning line and after saluting the national flag intonated the daily motto '*bil-Ruh bil-Dam Nafdeek ya Hafez*' 'We sacrifice our souls, our bloods for you Hafez'. In Bashar's time, Hafez was replaced with Bashar, and the motto changed accordingly: '*bil-Ruh bil-Dam Nafdeek ya Bashar*'. This political cult of Assad, will manifest itself after the 2011 uprising by the cultish behavior of Assad's supporters, such as the loyal motto '*al-Assad walla Mnerek al-Balad*' 'Either Assad or We Will Burn the Country'.

³⁷ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, s. 28.

³⁸ Ibid, 61.

³⁹ Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen & Nawara Mahfoud, (ed.), *Syria Speaks, Art and Culture From the Frontline*. (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

Patronage Politics in Syria

The second pillar of neopatrimonial power in Syria is the role of patronage relations and networks, through which patrimonial power penetrates the state and society and thereby consolidates its domination. The patronage relations establish a hierarchical relationship by definition⁴⁰, and organized in vertical measures, which differentiates it from the horizontal clientelist relationships. Hence, we can argue that patronage relations are a step forward from clientelism, in which the networks will be organized hierarchically, while the patron sits on the top of the chain. Another related difference is that the patronage relation is a kind of high-politics dealing with social groups, as opposed to clientelism, which could be limited to two persons. So, to have a patronage relation we need to have a consolidated social group from one side, and a patron on the other, in contrast to the clientelism which constitutes a relationship between two individuals. Yet, patronage relations constitute a kind of asymmetric relationship in favor of the patron.

In the case of the Assad regime, these patronage relations have manifested in Alawite Patronage and Baath Party Patronage, each of which have been organized in a downwards fashion, while the patron take the prime position. Yet arguably, the aim of the Assad regime was never to establish an organic nation, but to control and mobilize the society in a way to serve its neopatrimonial domination.

Alawite Patronage

The Assad regime has depended on patronage relations and networks to consolidate its power. One of the two patronage relationships it has relied on is the Alawite Patronage. Historically, the Alawite community has played a major role in Syrian politics, and particularly after the March 1963 coup which brought the Baath Party to power. The role of the Alawites in politics and mainly under the Assad regime is still a matter of contested analysis and debate. Also, dealing with the Alawite community as a homogenous group holds the risk of generalization.

It would be inaccurate to argue that Hafez al-Assad was the man who brought the Alawites into politics, which was dominated by the army within which the minorities had been overrepresented since the independence of Syrian republic⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, (New Yor: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1995), s. 181.

⁴¹ Veysel Kurt, "The Role of the Military in Syrian Politics and the 2011 Uprising", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 18 / No. 2 / 2016, pp. 109-128

Even before the Baath took power, army recruitment from the poorer strata resulted in 65 percent of the noncommissioned officers being Alawite⁴². Hanna Batatu mentions that ‘as early as 1955, Colonel Abd’ul Hamid as-Sarraj, chief of the Military Intelligence Bureau, discovered to his surprise that no fewer than 55 % or so of the noncommissioned officers belonged to the Alawi sect⁴³.

Not surprisingly, Hafez al-Assad had depended on his co-sects in forming his clique of loyalists, which operated as the inner circle of the regime. The patron-client relations between Hafez al-Assad and his inner circle loyalists, did not stop on this level, but this patronage relations and networks extended downwards to become the norm in which the regime recruits loyal officials accordingly. Thus, those inner circle loyalists, had generally depended also on their own co-sects. Hafez al-Assad’s brother Rifat command of the Defense Companies is an obvious example, as the praetorian guards said to be dominated by Alawite members. Muhammed Al-Khuli, member of Assad’s clique has extended the patronage relations downwards, as Sadowski mentions ‘after taking power, Alawites were promoted to command of all military intelligence services, under the careful supervision of Muhammed al-Khuli, an Alawite general’⁴⁴.

The Alawites did not become a ‘dominant minority’ nor did the Assad regime become fully sectarian. It is important to state here, that the Assad regime was eager not to be associated with the Alawites’ role, assuming that it was as such. Thus, on the one hand, the sectarian question was a taboo in Syria, and a matter which would lead to interrogation by the security apparatuses when mentioned. On the other hand, the Syrian presidents, both Hafez and Bashar have been keen to participate in the main prayers in the Grand Umayyad mosque in Damascus and show no disagreement nor try to distinguish themselves from the main official Sunni religiosity.

However, at the end of the day, the Alawites became a privileged group as the preferred clients for the patron and his close clients. Thus, the patronage relations transformed into a kind of patronage network, which operated mainly within the Alawite sect. In contrast to the patronage network under the Baath Party, which

⁴² Yahya M Sadowski, “Patronage and the Ba’th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria.”, 444

⁴³ Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), s. 157.

⁴⁴ Yahya M Sadowski, “Patronage and the Ba’th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria.”, s. 444

will be discussed later in more detail, the patronage networks resulting from Alawite patronage were limited only to the members of Alawite communities.

It can be truly argued that Hafez Assad used the Alawite power base and arranged it around his personality to consolidate his authority. However, on the other hand, the Alawite community also has its own internal dynamics and motivations which should not be neglected. As Goldsmith argues, using Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyya* concept⁴⁵, the Alawite community has its own *assabiyya*. The intersection between Hafez al-Assad's personal motivation with the dynamics of the Alawite community resulted in this fateful alliance.

These Alawite patronage networks have provided their clients with privileges in several domains. The patronage relations did not operate only within the state apparatus, but came to exist in other social domains. The Alawites also started to be overrepresented not only in the army but also in the bureaucracy. Hence 'an Alawi middle class emerged with the growth of the civil service, and over the past decade, the freezing of public sector recruitment has affected the Alawi community less than any other because Alawis are protected by a system of political patronage'⁴⁶.

The patronage relations under the Assad regime has boosted the Alawite *assabiye*, and helped the community to come together. Thereby, the Assad regime has become an essential dimension for the Syrian Alawite identity and feeling of belonging. The deeper the patronage networks spread within the Alawite community, the more they feel attached to the Assad regime. In contrast, the Assad regime succeeded in consolidating its patrimonial power, using the Alawite patronage network to penetrate the state apparatuses, mainly the army and security branches. Thereby, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad were able to keep tight control over the army and the state altogether by utilizing and mobilizing the Alawite community through the patronage relations and networks which are arranged hierarchically while the patron sits on the top of the chain.

⁴⁵ Hinnebusch & Ajami had also referred, before Goldsmith, to the role of *asabiyya* in the Alawite politics, see: Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria Under the Bath: The political Economy of Populist Authoritarianism." *The State and the political Economy of Reform in Syria*, (Fife, Scotland: the University of St Andrews Center for Syrian Studies, 2009), s. 5-24. & Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institute Press Publication), s.13.

⁴⁶ Fabrice Balanche, The Alawi Community and the Syria Crisis . *Middle East Institute*. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/alawi-community-and-syria-crisis> (Accessed March 25, 2018.)

The Alawite community has become deeply linked to Assad's regime and has invested in its survival, thanks to the patrimonial relations and networks. This patronage relations have contributed to the Alawite asabiyya along with the insecurity and consolidation of the community around the patrimonial family, Assad. This role has continued during Bashar's time, who even appointed two Chiefs of Staff, Ali Aslan and Ali Habib, as well as a Defense Minister, Ali Ayyub, who said to be from the Alawite community.

Baath Party Patronage

In additional to the Alawite patronage, the Assad regime has utilized Baath Party patronage to foster its patrimonial domination over the state and society in Syria. The Baath Party patronage networks were vital in expanding the social base of the regime and reaching out to various social layers. Hence, the Baath Party in Syria under the Assad family had lost its ideological idealization and had started to have an instrumental role in the hands of the patrimonial power. The Baath Party and its organizations were very instrumental in mobilizing the people, generating legitimacy, and glorifying the patron by practicing and celebrating the political cult of Assad. The patronage relations and networks which were established through the Baath Party helped the patrimonial power to penetrate the bureaucracy and mobilize various social segments, thus increasing the amount and diversifying power-holders, all within the interest of the patron, al-Assad. As Devlin argues "Assad can rightly be assessed as the man who converted Baathism in Syria from party rule into a dictatorship"⁴⁷.

During Hafez Assad's reign, the Baath Party enjoyed the official advantaged position in Syrian politics. The following privileges were guaranteed by the Syrian constitution: the Baath Party was to be the leading party of the state and society; the Baath Party was to lead the National Progressive Party, which includes other parties; the Baath Party is the only party that could conduct political activities in the military. This advantaged position has transformed it into a critical driver and was utilized for Baath Party patronage. However, the Baath Party plays little role in decision-making processes and was used more as a rubber stamp for the decisions made by Assad and his inner circle⁴⁸. Yet, it remains an essential role for orga-

⁴⁷ John F Devlin. "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis." *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 96, No.5 (1991): 1396-1407, s. 1406.

⁴⁸ CIA, *Syria Without Assad: Succession Politics*, (Middle East Division, Office of Regional Political Analysis, Central Intelligence Agency, 1978) Approved For Release 2006/05/25, s.13

nizing people, mobilizing the masses, and legitimizing the regime. From this point, pan-Arab ideology plays a role.

On the other hand, the party's body and affiliated organizations expanded more and more. The expanded and oversized body of the Baath Party, reveals the stretching of the patronage relations and patronage networks. The Baath Party started to be organized in every social segment and every corner of the country, yet this expansion in activities and membership, does not represent success in recruiting new believers in the party' ideology. Instead, it indicated the increasing domain of opportunism and the number of opportunists. However, the role of the state-sponsored political cult and security apparatus in pushing the people towards the party should not be neglected.

The Baath Party patronage relations goes downwards and operates to the benefit of the patron as well as the client. The patronage relations through the Baath Party was vital for Assad to maintain his political and social control, mobilize the people around his cult, generate public support and assert his legitimacy. On the other hand, being a member of the Baath Party was an advantage for a client who seeks access to power, social, bureaucratic or political upgrading. These patronage relations include all party ranks, from the peasants' federation in the countryside to the central committee of the party. Men like Abdullah al-Ahmar, the son of a poor construction worker who became the highest official of the Baath Party below Assad, developed a vibrant network of clients in the business community⁴⁹.

These patronage relations and networks were established on the ground through the political and social organizations of the Baath Party. For example, in order to realize the aim of patronizing Syrian politics through the party, Assad established the National Progressive Front, a Baath Party-controlled coalition of parties. However, they were not allowed to seek new members in the armed forces or schools,⁵⁰ where Baath Party was able to do so.

In the public and social domain, the role of the popular organizations (*al-Munazamat al-Sha'biyya*) was vital. These organizations organized and targeted every social segment; school pupils, university students, women, workers, peasants and so on. At the end of the day, the Baath Party established and an organization in

⁴⁹ Yahya M Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria.", s. 449.

⁵⁰ Charles Patterson, *Hafiz Al-Asad of Syria*, (iUniverse.com, Inc., 1991), s. 59.

every social field; the General Union of Peasants, the General Federation of Syrian Women, the General Federation of Trade Unions, the General Federation of Artisans Associations, the Union of Arab Writers, Munazzamat Talai' al-Baath the Pioneers of Baath Association, which targeted pupils from 6-12 years, Ittihad Shabibet al-Thawrah the Revolutionary Youth Union, which targeted students from 13-18 years, the National Union of Syrian Students⁵¹. Hence, '[Assad] strengthened the party-controlled organizations. These organizations helped mobilize support for Assad's regime among peasants, workers, students, women, young people, and other special groups within the Syrian society'⁵².

It is noteworthy, that these organizations could organize and operate within the state apparatuses. The organization process was a state-sponsored one, and their members were given influence over admission, academic appointment, scholarship, etc. Even in the countryside, peasants' federations held influence over the allocation of loans and credits. As Perthes mentions 'organized parallel to the administrative structure of the state and the public sector, the different party levels exercise what is referred to as 'popular control' over the respective level structure of bureaucracy'⁵³.

These patronage networks have extended the ruling base and increased the stakeholders in the system. New social segments from the rural in particular joined the system and started to benefit from the systematic opportunism. On the other hand, patrimonial power has expanded its controlling circle and at the end of the day was able to penetrate not only the bureaucratic domain but also the social life.

This role of the Baath Party and its patronage relations declined under Bashar's rule. Bashar's era witnessed the decreasing role of Arabism as an ideology in regional politics, mainly following the overthrow of Iraqi Baath in 2003, and with the deepened Syria's alliance with Iran under the so-called *Mehwar al-Mukawama* The Axis of Resistance. Internally he opened the door for a privatization process that benefit his close clients. However, the role of the Baath Party remained important during Bashar's time. The party membership witnessed a considerable expansion.

⁵¹ For more detailed information about these organization see; Jad al-Kareem al-Jeba'i, 2013. "al-Bunya al-Tasalutiyya lil-Nizam al-Suri, al-Nash'a wal-Tatawwur wal-Maal", *Halfiyat al-Thawra, Dirasat Suriyye*, (Bairut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), s.189-242.

⁵² Charles Patterson, *Hafiz Al-Asad of Syria*, (iUniverse.com, Inc., 1991), s. 58.

⁵³ Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, s. 158.

When Hafez died the party's membership was around 1,4 million, and by 2005 it reached 1.8 million⁵⁴. It is important to state here that this large membership does not reflect the real number of ideologues and believers, rather it is a result of the rooted opportunism and coercive policies which implies a compulsory membership for the students for example.

Like Alawite Patronage, the Baath Party patronage and its networks have been utilized by the patrimonial power of the neopatrimonial Assad regime to penetrate the Syrian state and society and thereby consolidate the personal power of the patrimonial. The patronage networks were vital in reaching out various social segments, increasing the shareholders, and mobilizing the public around the patrimonial power.

The Clientelism of the Assad Regime

In addition to the personalization and the patronage relations, the neopatrimonial power of Assad regime consolidates its authority through the clientelism and its networks. The clientelism networks allowed the patrimonial power to reach out to new social segments and individuals beyond the patronage networks' targeted groups. The patrimonial power which penetrated the political and social life through the patronage relations, expanded more to penetrate the economic domain through the clientelism. However, the clientelism differs from the patronage relations in its related matter. While the patronage relations and networks tend to have a hierarchical order and thus take a vertical shape, the clientelism relation could be a horizontal relation that implies an interaction between a patron and a client. So, it does not target one social group in a patronage manner which implies the patron to be on the top of the chain. Rather it extends to include all the individuals in the society through horizontal patron-client relations, regardless of their social affiliation or belonging. In other words, while the patronage relations concern group politics and thus targeted social or political groups, the clientelism is opened to all individuals who live under the patrimonial power.

While the patronage relations are manifested through the Alawite patronage and Baath Party patronage. Here, the patronage-clientelism relations is limited to the members of either social or political group, Alawite or Baath Party. On the other

⁵⁴ Eyal Zisser, *Comanding Syria: Bashar Al-Assad and the First Years in Power*, (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), s. 71.

hand, the clientelism is a cross-sectarian and a cross-political strata phenomenon. In the clientelism, the client-patron relation is a mutually beneficial relationship, which generally implies a martial reward, not ideological one. Thus, the clientelism, relatively due its nature, function and flourish in the economic domain. Hence, it is understandable that this clientelism has existed more among the Sunni merchants of the urban cities in Syria, while the patronage relations of Alawite and Baath Party have found its base among the lower social class in the rural areas and the agricultural economy-based small cities such as Daraa.

Thus, the clientelism in Syria goes beyond, and it is not limited only to the political domain, it expanded also to the economic domain. Although public sector through the state planned economy has enjoyed an upper hand in the Syrian economy, that does not mean that the private sector does not enjoy relative independence, in particular, the merchants of the two bigger cities, Damascus and Aleppo. For example, the private sector occupies an almost exclusive place in the sphere of retailing, tourism, trucking, real estate: in 1973 it officially controlled 25% of wholesale and 32% of foreign trade⁵⁵. At the onset of the Syrian uprising, 70% of the Syrian economy was controlled by the private sector⁵⁶.

The merchants and businessmen community, in general, were linked to the patrimonial power through clientelism relations. Through the clientelism the business community has guaranteed a license for their activities and sometimes benefited from the state-sponsored or owned projects, in contrast, they maintained their loyalty to the patrimonial power and sided with it in case of crises.

Hafez Assad's Era and Business Community

In contrast to his neo-Baathist predecessors, who were one of the most radical in the Arab world, in term of generating a social change, Hafez Assad after taking power in November 1970, started an era of reconciliation with the middle class, especially the merchants⁵⁷. Assad tried to accommodate Sunni interests by relaxing the economic restrictions on Sunni merchants and businessmen⁵⁸. Hafez restrained

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Aurora Sottimano, The Syrian Business Elite: Patronage Networks and War Economy, *Syria Untold*.

<http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2016/09/the-syrian-business-elite-patronage-networks-and-war-economy/> Accessed March 26, 2018.

⁵⁷ Yahya M Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria", s. 447.

⁵⁸ Martha Neff Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), s. 35.

the revolutionary policies in economic domain. Talk of collectivization stopped, trade controls were relaxed, and the government underwrote a program of loans for small businesses.⁵⁹ In front of a delegation of wealthy Damascene merchants on 6 December 1970, president Hafiz al-Assad announced his intention to do all he could to enhance the role of the private sector in Syria's commerce and industry⁶⁰.

The modus operandi between the Assad regime and the business community shaped through the clientelism. The clientelism relations started to be formulated mainly between the patrimonial power represented by the political and security ruling elite, who controlled the political life and thus the state's resources, on the one hand, and the merchants and businessmen community on the other. Hereby, A partnership was forged between the Alawite officers in the army and the security services, and the Sunni merchants class. The children of the senior commanders had done particularly well by that relationship, they were called, *Awlad al-Sultah* (children of authority), literally sons of the authority.⁶¹

On the other hand, this newly emerged capitalized bureaucratic class, or the bureaucratic bourgeoisie started to be the driving force behind the crony capitalism. A new class of enriched individuals has started to emerge to form a 'crony capitalists,' who shares a big stake of the semi-formal and informal economic activities. For instance, smuggling and particularly from Lebanon, started to be one of the main informal economic sector that controlled by the security officers, supplied 70% of all non-military foreign trade in early 1980s⁶². Another interesting example was the affair of nuclear waste, which former vice-president Abdulhalim Khaddam and his family will be accused of. Ironically Khaddam himself, following his defected from the regime, will describe the economic modus operandi under Assad's regime as 'corporatization of corruption.'⁶³

The networks that the regime forged with elite business actors paid dividends in times of crisis. Badr ad-Din ash-Shallah, then president of the Damascus Cham-

⁵⁹ Yahya M Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria.", s. 447.

⁶⁰ Fred H Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War, Thirty Years of Confrontation*. (New York: Cronell University Press, 1996), s. 77.

⁶¹ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*. (Stanford, California: Hoover Institute Press Publication, 2012), s. 73.

⁶² Yahya M Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria.", s. 454.

⁶³ Leon Goldsmith, "Syria's Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective", *Ortadoğu Etütləri ORSAM*, Vol. 3 No.1, (2012), s. 44

ber of Commerce, assured the loyalty of big business to Hafez Assad in 1982, when the regime violently crushed an uprising in Hama⁶⁴.

Assad also opened the door by 1990s for the business community to be represented in the controlled political sphere through paving the way for some Damascus Chamber of Commerce's representatives to take seats in the parliament. Hereby the regime has expanded the ruling base, although the role of the parliament in Syrian politics is, without doubt, limited and controlled. By the end of the day, capitalists were never able to transform their growing economic power into political influence, unless they act and move within the patrimonial power's consent.

The clientelism was the modus operandi through which the relations between the Assad regime and the business community had been shaped. The clientelism relations and networks allowed the patrimonial power to oversee the economic domain and its activities and sometimes to shape it in the light of its interest, and on the other hand, allowed the business community to reach out state's resources and gain the license to operate in the economic domain, which continued to enjoy relative independence and was not transformed to entirely state ruled as in the case of the totalitarian regimes.

Under Bashar's Rule; from Clientelism to Patronage

The relatively independence economic domain, in which the Sunni urban merchants were operating in the Hafez's period has been restricted under Bashar's role. Bashar's role has witnessed the emergence and the consolidation of a new class of businessmen, many of them being from the Alawite community, who enjoyed close relations with the patrimonial power. Those newly emerged class has attempted to patrimonialism the economic domain as well. Thus, it could be argued that the class of *Awlad al-Sultah* which started to emerge under Hafez's role, has continued to consolidate and expand under Bashar, paving the way for the upgrading of *Awlad al-Sultah*.

The liberalization processes which was launched in Syria under Bashar Assad in the 2000s go in parallel with the consolidation of the patrimonialism of the head of the regime in the economic realm. Hence, the liberalization was going in favor of a bunch of 'entrepreneurs' who enjoy close ties with the patron. Bashar Assad's

⁶⁴ Aurora Sottimano, *The Syrian Business Elite: Patronage Networks and War Economy* 2016, (Accessed March 26, 2018)

cousin Rami Makhlouf exemplifies this new mode of corruption whereby individuals close to the regime use family connections for ‘predatory self-enrichment’ in the private sector.⁶⁵ The result was that. Public assets were de facto transferred into the hands of crony capitalists, privileged networks, and corporations linked with the Asads by family and clan ties, while small business and the agricultural sector – the backbones of the Syrian economy – were neglected⁶⁶.

For instance, Rami Makhlouf monopolized the sector of the mobile phone in Syria which started to operate in 2000 by two operators, Makhlouf had a share of 75% of the first operator (Syriatel) and was one of the two owners of the second operator (94). Moreover, the Syrian authority started to harass Makhlouf’s partners through the security services. Thus, he ended up controlling the two operators⁶⁷. When Riyad Saif, a Sunni businessman and a member of the parliament at that time criticized what he called ‘irregularities in the phone licenses’ he was soon arrested and imprisoned⁶⁸. Saif, who fled the country and joined the opposition following the uprising, will be elected as the head of The General Assembly of the Syrian National Coalition of the Opposition and Revolutionary Forces in May 2017. Another example was Makhlouf’s attempt to take over the dealership of Daimler-Benz from ‘Omar Sankqar & Sons Company’ which belongs to the Sanqar family a well-known Damascene old Sunni bourgeoisie.⁶⁹ Interestingly to note here, that Ali and Wasim Sanqar (members of Sanqer family) funded one of the earliest opposition conferences in May 2011⁷⁰.

The Assad regime which formulated and consolidated its patrimonial power within the state apparatus and in the political and social domain through the penetration of the patronage relations (which comprise the clientelism), has tried to oversee and control the economic domain through the clientelism relations. However, the modus operandi of the patrimonial power in the economic domain has

⁶⁵ Soren Schmidt, “The Development Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons form Syria”, *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*, (Fife, Scotland: the University of St Andrews Center for Syrian Studies, 2009), s. 33.

⁶⁶ Aurora Sottimano. The Syrian Business Elite: Patronage Networks and War Economy.

⁶⁷ Soren Schmidt. “The Development Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons form Syria.”, s. 30

⁶⁸ Anthony Shadid, Syrian Businessman Becomes Magnet for Anger and Dissent. *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/world/asia/01makhlouf.html> (Accessed in May, 5th 2018).

⁶⁹ Soren Schmidt, “The Development Role of the State in the Middle East: Lessons form Syria.”, s. 31-32.

⁷⁰ Aurora Sottimano, The Syrian Business Elite: Patronage Networks and War Economy.

been upgraded throughout the rule of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad from simple patron-client relations in the early years, to a more systematic clientelism networks by the end of Hafez's time, this upgrading reached an attempt of establishing a patronage over the economic domain under Bashar's rule, eliminating more and more any space for non-patrimonial social activity.

This trend to patrimonialize the economic domain could be explained in two explanations; the first one, this would come as a reasonable second step after patronizing the political and social domain, since the patrimonial power is not expected to stop expanding and penetrating all aspects of the society to consolidate its power more and more. At the end of the day the systematic clientelism, which a step forward could transform to a patronage relation by time. The second explanation could be found in the inner circle of around Bashar al-Assad which started to include businessmen like Rami Makhlouf, the category that was not found in the clique of Hafez al-Assad. These economic and business-oriented elites would seek more penetration and patronizing of the economic domain for their benefit. While the traditional security and political elite had focused more on penetration and patronizing the political and social domains, the new formed economic benefiter elites start to target the economic domain as well.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Assad regime represents a case of authoritarian regime, however, this authoritarianism needs to be but under one typology that describes the regime and distinguishes it from other authoritarian regimes. The Assad regime fails to represent a case of totalitarian (and thereby post-totalitarian) or sultanistic regime. On the other hand, it seems that the arguments of populist-authoritarianism (PA), authoritarianism upgrading (AU), post-populist authoritarianism (PPA), and its associated conceptualizations, have their shortages. They tend to analyze and discuss authoritarianism in the framework, and sometimes as a result, of political and economic drivers. Thereby they neglect the personal motivation, which should be a departure point to analyze authoritarianism and the evolution of authoritarian regimes. In contrast, the neopatrimonial conceptualization puts personal domination in the center and accepts it as the driving force behind political and economic transformation, taking into consideration the role of patronage, as well as clientelist relations.

Neopatrimonialism seems to present an integral and explanatory framework for the Assad regime and similar regimes. The neopatrimonialism operates to consolidate the personal dominasian of the patron and penetrate the bureaucratic institution as well as the polititcal and social domains through mechanisms like patronage and clientalist relations.

In the core of Assad regime personalization strategy, functions the role of the loyal clique, whose members are responsible for maintaining tight control of the state's apparatuses, and in particular the security apparatuses and the army. Personalizing the security branches and the army has transformed them to what Weber had named 'the patrimonial troops'. In parallel to maintaining personal control over the state, Assad's cult of personality has been constructed in the public domain and the ideational realm, transforming Syria to Suriyet'ul Assad - Assad's Syria.

Meanwhile, the Assad regime has utilized dual patronage relations in order to penetrate the bureaucratic realm and society; Alawite patronage and Baath Party patronage. The patronage networks among Alawites and the Baath Party, which were arranged in a hierarchical manner with the patron on top, have enabled the patron to penetrate the state and the society. On the other hand the clientelism is another mechanism which functions in the patrimonial penetration processes, through which the patrimonial power was able to reach out the economic domain. However, following Bashar's rising to power, there was a trend of patrimonialization of the economic domain by the patrimonial power and associated loyal businessmen. Thus the patrimonial power under Bashar has taken a step forward to widen its penetration by patrimonializing the economic domain as well.

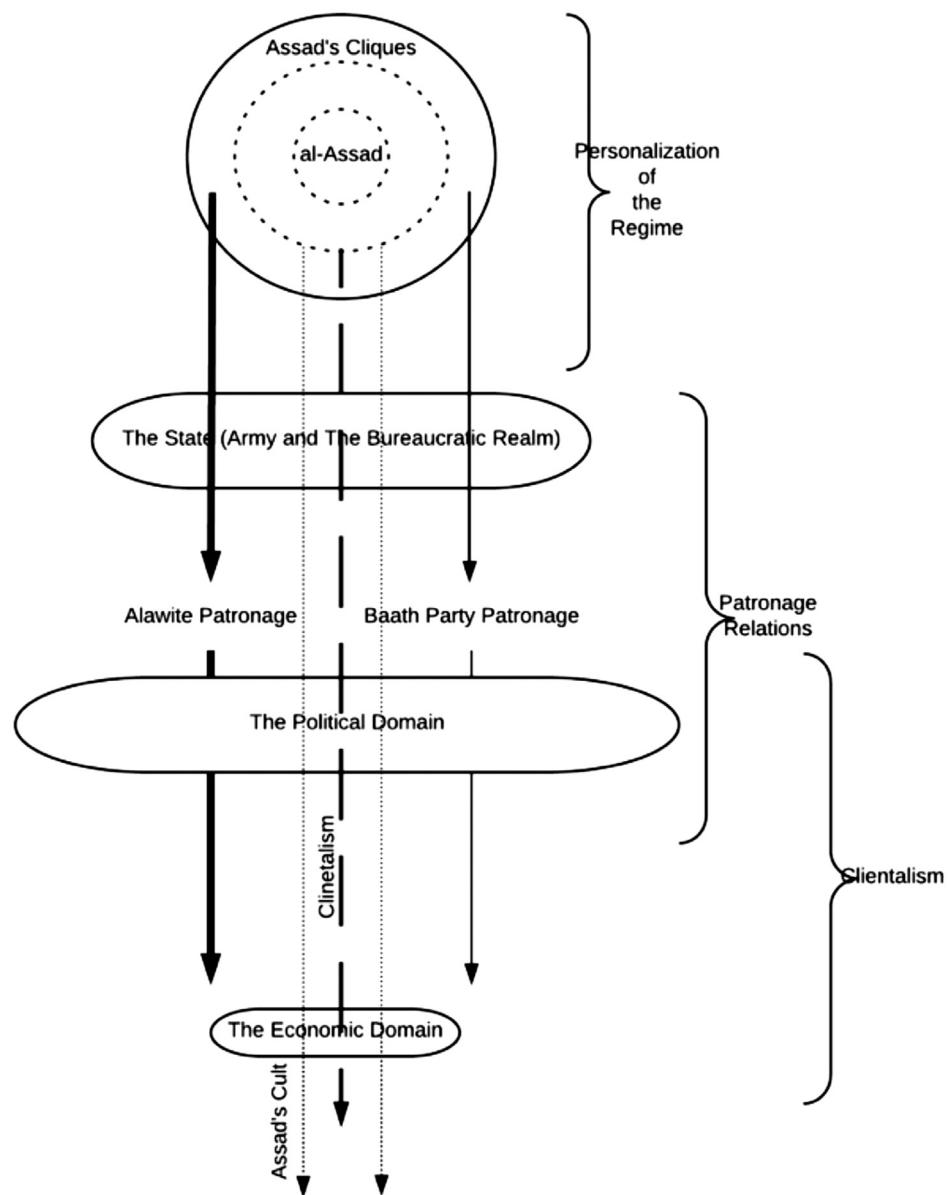


Illustration of the controlling and penetration mechanisms of the neopatrimonial domination of the Assad regime

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