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THE FAILURE OF THE SECURITY PARADIGM IN SYRIA

THE HUMAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Few would dispute the assertion that human security has failed in Syria. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have had well-documented deficits in human security emerging from coercive internal politics, a lack of respect for human rights such as freedom of expression, and limited freedom from fear and want. The concept of human security has developed mainly within the domain of UN development policy, but it has also made headway in security policy, being advocated as one approach in international crisis management and peacekeeping. Less attention has been paid to its adaptability in forming the basis for the internal security policy of any given state. The main argument of this paper is that human security principles can be the cornerstones of state security, potentially preventing, mitigating, and remedying security issues within a state that could lead to societal upheaval. The argument is presented by outlining some major developments in the history of modern Syria up to its present state of civil war. The paper shows that the security paradigm exercised in Syria has led to a double failure in which human insecurity has resulted in turmoil for ordinary people and has shattered the authoritarian governance. The paper suggests that the rebuilding of security sectors must be based on the principles of human security, not only in Syria but also in the Arab world at large.[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Security in Syria has collapsed. In fact, it can be argued that the authoritarian security paradigm, enforced in Syria for decades, has utterly failed in providing security. The latest upheaval and popular uprising, which has led to an ongoing civil war with its regional dimensions, has claimed some 100,000-120,000 casualties: armed rebels, law enforcement officials and civilians, as well as hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons. This study seeks to identify major milestones in the development of the security paradigm in Syria and explain its failure. The main issue, therefore, is to ascertain what actually contributed to the failure of the security paradigm.

Security is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. In terms of complexities, Syria is *without comparison* as a subject for study. Multi-layered, multi-dimensional and multi-organisational security systems created a security paradigm in which the main function was to protect and safeguard the authoritarian regime against both internal and external threats.[1] Thus, the state's main, and almost only concern and overall objective was the survival of the regime.

State security has traditionally been the focus when examining security in the international system. But security is much more than the security of states, and many definitions of security exist. It is often defined as just a feeling – the general sense of security, without elaborating on its meaning. Feelings which, by their nature, are difficult to conceptualise, are often quite obscure, remain subconscious and are subjective. Nevertheless, feelings often lead to a conceived perception of security and thus have practical implications on different levels, whether in private life choices or state policy. This perception also varies depending on whose security we are talking about, be it individual, family, community, village, enterprise, state and national, or even international.

A variety of factors are seen to produce the feeling of security and/or to create the circumstances in which this feeling is sustained. To be more precise, security must be understood as the sum of a number of security-producing factors, which are collectively perceived as overall security. Thus, livelihood is as integral a part of security as personal or physical security. To give an example, food security, so crucial for any population, used to be good in Syria. It has deteriorated only as a result of drought over the past few years.[2]

It is also evident that there will always be actors, as well as factors, that produce security and/or insecurity. These producers of security, whatever they may be, often exist side-by-side in any societal and cultural setting and are not necessarily limited to within a state. Produced security may have a multitude of objectives from environmental wellbeing and usage of natural resources to supporting authoritarian regimes by supressing their people. This provides space for the instrumentalisation of security for objectives that are not necessarily benign. The question that should always be posed is what recipients perceive about their own security: How do they describe their own security and what factors affect that perception? Threats, real or imagined, define

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1   See for example Ziadeh, Radwan, *Power and Politics in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (I. B. Tauris, revised ed. 2013), 23–26.

2   Zurayk, Rami, *Food, Farming and Freedom: Sowing the Arab Spring.* Charlottesville (Virginia: Just World Books 2011) 106.

either actively or passively the production of security, as well as the way in which it is perceived.

The description of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region in the Arab Human Development Report 2009 aptly applies to Syria as it states that:

> *State security may at times be achieved at the expense of the individual security of its citizens and those residing in its territories. This occurs when state authorities seek to arrive at what they imagine to be 'absolute security' by resorting to extraordinary measures parading as 'law and order' and by restricting the freedoms of those they suspect of threatening national security.*[3]

Eva Bellin has observed in her article on coercive institutions and leaders that authoritarian security means exercising absolute security while restricting actions perceived as a threat to national security; the latter of which becomes a source of instability. Bellin further states that authoritarianism has proved to be exceptionally robust in the MENA region because the coercive apparatus in the region has proved willing and able to crush reform initiatives from below.[4] Again, this applies to Syria, as I endeavour to show in this article.

Authoritarianism has not been in doubt in the case of Syria. By and large, it was (and still is amid the war) an authoritarian police state, where authoritarian security permeates all spheres of life. According to one estimate, *there is one secret service member for almost every 150 Syrians over the age of fifteen.*[5] But, as Carsten Wieland continues:

> *Law and order in the country was proverbial for both the native population and its tourists. The overall crime rate was extremely low, though concrete figures were difficult to obtain. Crimes were not reported in the media and relevant statistics were kept secret. It was safe for anyone, including women, to stroll through the streets at night. Safety was a factor that all Syrians, including members of the opposition, were speaking about positively when they described their country.*[6]

The security paradigm of Syria was able to produce some degree of safety and stability for its citizens. This was quite a general perception among its own populace and visitors alike.

There was no significant threat to personal physical security and safety for the vast majority of Syrians. What must be borne in mind is the obvious fact that feeling secure or safe to a certain degree does not correlate with freedom. Syria was not considered a free country in terms of political rights and civil liberties, nor in the overall freedom rating in the Freedom House rankings.[7] Some Syrians, however, spoke about existing social freedom, meaning one's freedom to declare thoughts and beliefs, as well as women's

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3 *Arab Human Development Report 2009*: Challenge to Human Security in Arab Countries (United Nations Development Programme), 24.

4 Bellin, Eva, "Coercive Institutions and Coercive Leaders", in Posusney, Marsha Pripstein & Angrist, Michele Penner (eds.) *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance.* (London, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers 2005), 26–27.

5 Wieland, Carsten, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant.* Cune 2006, 38 and Wieland, Carsten, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring.* Cune Press, Seattle 2012, 17.

6   Ibid., 17.

7 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World" – Syria 2001–2013. Available at: www.freedomhouse.org. Accessed: 4 May 2013.

rights.[8] But even so-called social freedom cannot be taken as all-inclusive given that freedom in Syria always has its limits and controls. Ordinary Syrians' perceptions of security would have been indispensable for this study. But as alluded to above, it is difficult to obtain reliable statistics and conduct surveys in Syria.

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8   Glass, Charles, "Syria: The Citadel & the War", *The New York Review of Books*, June 7–20, 2012, Vol. LIX, No. 10, 15–18.

1. THE DEBATE ON HUMAN SECURITY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Human security is, and remains, a widely debated issue. In essence, it lacks commonly agreed concepts. Christie Ryerson argues in his critical approach to human security that while the concept may have value in highlighting particular issues, it is unable to provide the basis for a substantive change in the international security system.[9] Ryerson is also critical about the human security interpretation given by Mary Kaldor from the Human Security Study Group at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Kaldor emphasises aspects of freedom from fear more than freedom from want, and refers to the protection of individuals from direct threats to their safety and physical integrity, including the actions of the state against its citizens.[10]

This could be called the Kaldorian interventionist approach to human security. Ryerson argues that it is being adapted for our own ends and is therefore defined in a similar way to the state-centric, Northern and masculinised liberal system.[11] Oliver Richmond makes a distinction between the institutional approach and the emancipatory approach to human security, emphasising the emancipatory aspect of the debate: *Human security is therefore focused upon emancipation from oppression, domination, and hegemony, as well as want.*[12]

In Richmond's distinction the institutional approach is typically a Kaldorian approach, namely a top-down one in which human security is dependent upon security and strong states and internationally-driven institutions in order to provide very basic forms of human security – mainly physical security.[13] This, however, contradicts the language of human security principles Kaldor uses when she defines a bottom-up approach as one of the main principles. But its interventionism (in peace operations, for example) makes it factually the institutional approach.[14] In addition, the concept has been criticised for lacking a link between theory and practice. Operationalising the concept in order to make it practical has generally been perceived as a challenge.

Caroline Thomas explicitly links human security with democratic governance:

> *The qualitative aspect of human security is about the achievement of human dignity which incorporates personal autonomy, control over one's life and unhindered participation in the life of the community. Emancipation from oppressive power structures, be they global, national or local in origin and scope, is necessary for human security. Human security is orientated towards an active and substantive notion of democracy, one that ensures the opportunity of all for participation in the decisions that affect their lives. Therefore it is engaged directly with discussions of democracy at all levels, from the local to the global.*[15]

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9   Christie Ryerson, "Critical Voices and Human Security: To Endure, To Engage or To Critique?" *Security Dialogue* Vol. 41(2), April 2010, 169–190.

10   Korhonen, Senja (ed.), *Training Manual: Human Security in Peacebuilding*. CMC Finland 2009, 15.

11   Ibid., 186.

12   Oliver Richmond 2007, "Emancipatory Forms of Human Security and Liberal Peacebuilding", *International Journal* 62(3): 460–461.

13   Ibid., 460–461.

14   See more on Kaldor's approach in *A European Way of Security: The Madrid Report of the Human Security Study Group.*

15   Caroline Thomas, *Global Governance, Development and Human Security*. London: Pluto Press, 2000, 6–7.

1.1 Human security in the Arab Human Development Report 2009

Human security was defined for the first time in the UN Agenda for Peace in 1992, which broadly defined it as freedom from fear and want, whereas Mary Kaldor has proposed a narrower interpretation as shown in the previous section. The former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan asserts in the Millennium Report that the requirements of security today have come to embrace the protection of communities and individuals from internal violence,[16] thus clearly moving away from traditional state-centric security. Human security is also defined as prioritising the security of people rather than states.[17]

The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2009 is relevant as a region-specific study for considering Syria's security paradigm and human security within the Arab world. It engages with the internationally recognised dimensions of human security as identified in the 1994 global Human Development Report, but it also invokes specific threats to human security in the Arab countries. These include dimensions such as foreign occupation, foreign and regional military interventions (Iraq, for example),[18] violence that springs from conflict along primordial identities, and oppressive state practices that undermine human security.[19]

The report positions human security as an appropriate concept for describing and analysing the situation in the Arab world. Its definition reads as follows: *Human security is the liberation of human beings from those intense, extensive, prolonged, and comprehensive threats to which their lives and freedom are vulnerable.*[20]

In this definition, freedom is a central value for the individual, since in the Arab context, including Syria, it is frequently threatened from within and without, by powers at home and abroad.[21] The AHDR regards human security as complementary to state security as it asserts that state security is necessary for individual human security.[22] But it requires a conceptual shift as the AHDR goes on to state:

> *The concept shifts attention from questions of state security – which are generally overemphasized in the political discourse of the region and sometimes sought at the expense of citizens' security – to that of human security, without which state security has little value. This understanding of the concept, then, views human security as a condition for the achievement of state security.*[23]

Contemporary Arab writers echo this view. Most of them express a belief in an unbreakable bond between individual human security and national security on the one hand, and national security and external military threats on the other. Other writers

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16   Kofi A. Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, 43.

17   Duffield, Mark, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples.* (Polity Press 2007), 111.

18   *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenge to Human Security in Arab Countries* (New York: United Nations Publications 2009), 25.

19   Ibid., 24–25.

20   Ibid., 17, 23.

21   Ibid., 23–24.

22   Ibid., 24.

23   Ibid., 18.

believe that the authoritarian state is the source of the greatest threats to human security in the region. Arab writers hold that the achievement of individual human security will have the effect of transforming the authoritarian state into one that respects the rule of law. This shift may require, among other things, the reform of existing security apparatuses or possibly even the establishment of new security institutions.[24]

The AHDR concludes that ostensibly legal measures designed to limit freedoms – justified by the protection of national security – may in fact end up threatening the security of the state itself, if this leads citizens to collaborate with a foreign power advancing its own interests on the first state's territory; and this may eventually bring down the government.[25] This development is taking place in the civil war in Syria, as described later in this article. The AHDR 2009 further states that human insecurity rears its head even in Arab countries that enjoy relative stability, where security forces hold sway in curtailing or violating citizens' rights.[26] Such fears also permeate more fortunate Arab societies, which, although free from armed conflicts or occupying forces, suffer under the dead hand of authoritarian power.[27]

The overall conclusion of the Arab Human Development Report 2009 is that citizens liberated from fear and need are far more likely to acknowledge the political, economic, and social legitimacy of a responsible and responsive state that protects their interests.[28]

1.2 Human security as an analytical framework for Syria

The AHDR 2009 measurement of human security is partly utilised in this study as a broad framework for analysing Syria's security paradigm. Many principles developed by the Human Security Study Group are also useful in contemplating human security vis-à-vis state security. Two of these principles deserve attention: the primacy of human rights, and legitimate political authority.[29] Kaldor states that legitimate political authority is all about the relationship between the government and the people, and it is civil society that mediates this relationship.[30] Richmond underlines further that

> *without a civil peace and human security an institutional and constitutional peace is unlikely to be legitimate, and the resulting focus on a victor's peace will merely resemble a postcolonial praxis of intervention. Without legitimacy and consensus – via a social contract – the liberal peace veers towards the unsustainable conservative end of the spectrum – where peace is top-down, based upon coercion or force, and focuses on constraints rather than emancipation.*[31]

In its effort to measure levels of human security among citizens in the Arab states, the AHDR 2009 compares the performance of these states with the norms associated

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24   AHDR 2009, 23.

25   Ibid., 24.

26   Ibid., 17.

27   Ibid., 18.

28   Ibid., 18.

29   Beebe, Shannon D. & Kaldor, Mary, *The Ultimate Weapon is no Weapon: Human Security and the New Rules of War and Peace.* New York: Public Affairs 2010, 8–9.

30   Ibid., 14.

31   Oliver Richmond 2007, "Emancipatory Forms of Human Security and Liberal Peacebuilding", *International Journal* 62(3): 462.

with good governance. It analyses whether the Arab states win the acceptance of their citizens, uphold and guarantee their rights to life and freedom and protect them from aggression. Its analysis is based on four criteria: 1) the acceptability of the state to its own citizens; 2) state compliance with international charters pertaining to human rights; 3) how the state utilises its monopoly on the means of force and coercion; and 4) how far institutional checks and balances prevent abuses of power. In fact, these criteria coincide with the human security principles proposed by Kaldor. The AHDR 2009 concludes that large and frequent shortfalls in these areas often combine to turn the state into a threat to human security, instead of human security's chief support.[32]

In this regard, it is interesting to observe that while the indicator of Syria's average institutional quality decreased between 1996–2007 from –0.80 to –0.99 in terms of freedom of expression and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, the rule of law and control of corruption,[33] the general perception indicates a more positive trend as we shall see in the latter part of this article.

Several ways of measuring human security exist. Some indicators have focused narrowly on security in terms of the presence of violence and the threat of bodily harm or death. Others tend to focus on traditional development indicators. Methodologies for measuring human security have been criticised, with one of the criticisms stemming from the fact that measurement does not problematise the world it is attempting to describe. In addition, focusing on basic security indicators does not necessarily chime with people's perception of security as referred to above in the context of Syria, nor reflect how some communities might prioritise particular issues over others.[34]

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32 *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenge to Human Security in Arab Countries* (New York: United Nations Publications 2009), 4, 53.

33   AHDR 2009, Annex II: Indicators of governance in the Arab countries, Table 1 and Table 2, pp. 261–262.

34 Christie Ryerson & Amitav Acharya, *Human Security Research: Progress, Limitations and New Directions.* Report of a Conference Organised by the Centre for Governance and International Affairs, Department of Politics, University of Bristol 8–11 February 2008 (Working Paper No. 11–08), 8–9.

2. THE SECURITY LANDSCAPE OF MODERN SYRIA

The former Ottoman province of Syria was mandated to the French in 1920 against the will of the Syrians, who were defeated in the famous Maysaloun battle against advancing French troops in the summer of 1920. The Syrians' overall feeling was one of betrayal in the post-Ottoman mapping of the Middle East, and they saw it as the forcible breakup of geographic Syria, with the partition of its remains along religious or sectarian lines leading to the loss of much of its access to the Mediterranean Sea.[35] Syria declared independence in 1943 but actually attained it only after the last French troops left in 1946. A series of military coups was followed by civilian rule in 1954. The instability created by the still ongoing power struggle since independence in 1946 has shaped Syria's security paradigm. It effectively secured the impetus for long-term President Hafez al-Asad's quest for stability upon seizing power in 1970.

Syria is a patchwork of religious and ethnic groups, though officially a secular country. Slightly over 70% are Sunni Muslims. The biggest among the Muslim minorities are the Alawis, making up some 12%. The Kurds, the biggest non-Arab minority make up almost 10% of the population. Christians, likewise, form about 10% of the population.[36] Syria's population was some 1.5 million inhabitants at the beginning of the Mandate era. In 2013 it reached a level of some 23-24 million inhabitants. The population has actually increased ten-fold within less than a century.

Syria's geostrategic location has always impacted its development, security discourse and practice. Neighbouring Israel, which occupies the Golan Heights, has left its mark on Syria's foreign and domestic security policy. Syria regarded itself as a vanguard of the resistance against Israel, while the US labelled it one of the axis-of-evil countries. Myriad internal and external factors in Syria contributed both to the policy and practice of its security paradigm and made it extremely complex.

2.1 The Great Revolt and its suppression – a model for a coercive security paradigm

The Great Revolt in Syria in 1925-1927 was, as Philip S. Khoury has stated, one of the signal events in the history of modern Syria for it revealed new broad-based alliances linking together different elites and rural forces, as well as different social classes and religious communities.[37] Michael Provence went even further, postulating that it was the signal event in the emergence of mass politics in the Arab world.[38] It was not the first time that ordinary people had joined an uprising but it was certainly a seminal event in encouraging popular movements in the Middle East, seen lately in the new Arab awakening since the end of 2010. Demonstrations to celebrate events were a common

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35 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1999), 116.

36 Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London and New York: Zed Books 2003), 3–4.

37 Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920–1945* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 166.

38 Provence, Michael, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism.* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2005), 13.

practice in Syria during the Ottoman period, often organised by popular committees or local government to dramatise popular sentiments during international crises.[39]

To a large extent, the underlying causes of the Great Revolt were economic due to the crop failure in 1925 combined with a simultaneous fluctuation of the French franc, to which the Syrian currency was linked. Other factors that triggered the Revolt were an increase in land tax and more systematic revenue collection.[40] These were coupled with a general feeling of alienation from what was perceived as an oppressive occupier, namely France. A broad coalition of Syrians joined together to resist colonial oppression.[41] In terms of human security, freedom from want was lacking and some degree of fear also prevailed. The fear only increased as a direct result of oppressive methods enacted by the French to suppress the popular movement.

The mandate government, though sworn to advance the interests and development of the mandate population, used collective punishment against entire towns – including arbitrary executions, house demolitions, utilisation of tanks and armoured vehicles in urban neighbourhoods, population transfers from region to region, and round-the-clock aerial and artillery bombardment of civilian populations – to pacify the territory under mandate.[42] Nearly 1,500 Damascenes were killed in two days during the French bombing of Damascus in October 1925.[43]

The French – realising that the general population often lent their support to rebels – concluded that they must target not only rebel bands but the general population too. The principle of collective punishment was firmly entrenched in French policy, as Daniel Neep has stated in his recently published book on Syria.[44] Neep recounts how, after 1925, villages suspected of complicity with rebels were made the targets of aerial and artillery bombardments. Furthermore, named individuals, especially political leaders and rebel commanders, were subject to punishment by means of a graded series of increasingly severe sanctions which began with house arrests and imprisonment, then moved to the demolition of property, exile from the country, and ultimately public execution. Beyond that, the French *had recourse to one further, post-ultimate sanction: the public exhibition of dead rebel bodies.*[45]

One might ask to what extent the French Mandate 'pacification' methods played a role in designing and forming the coercive security paradigm in Syria in the decades that followed the French Mandate up to the present day. The Great Revolt created one of the precedents for popular mobilisations in Syria. It was caused to a significant extent by human insecurity (oppression, poverty, and French governance perceived as non-legitimate). The main cause of insecurity was the French mandatory presence during

39   James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (University of California Press 1998), 260–261.

40   Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1999), 116.

41   Provence, Michael, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism.* Austin: University of Texas Press 2005, 14.

42   Ibid., 26.

43   Ibid., 104.

44   Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation.* (Cambridge University Press 2012), 50.

45   Ibid., 50.

which the occupying troops were actors on the ground very much against the will of the Syrian population. The seeds of Syria's instability were duly sown: some 6,000 Syrians lost their lives and 100,000 were made homeless as a result of French suppression of the revolt.[46]

2.2 The power struggle of the first decades

The first decades of Syrian independence were characterised by factionalism and power struggles, as well as successive coups and purges within the military. Patrick Seale, in his biography of Hafez al-Asad, has described the period since the end of the 1940s as a sort of unruly permanent revolution.[47] Regime changes produced uncertainty and insecurity in the population. Moreover, losing the Golan Heights to Israel was both a political and human catastrophe for Syria in 1967 and increased the sense of insecurity, something that was skilfully exploited by strengthening internal security through coerciveness in the 1970s.

There was, however, a certain relief among Syrians when Hafez al-Asad rose to power in 1970.[48] He began to consolidate his rule through the Ba'th party and the security apparatus. In the first years of his rule, Asad brought tens of thousands of Syrians into the service of various security apparatuses. This automatically meant a close connection between the regime, and those serving and their families. It is quite telling that the number of personnel working for security (and intelligence) services rose from about 100,000 in 1970 to more than 500,000 by 1991.[49] Asad did not succeed in winning acquiescence over large sections of Sunni Muslim urban society because of the Alawi-dominated character of both the military and security support base and the anti-Islamic policies he adopted.[50]

The October War in 1973, while not resulting in the recovery of the occupied Golan Heights, demonstrated Syria's military capability to some extent. But Syria's invasion of Lebanon in 1976 and protracted presence there reduced its internal security, and was one of the reasons for mounting opposition to Asad's regime and renewed mayhem in Syria, spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Asad's security paradigm consisted of two objectives: stabilisation of the country and consolidation of his rule. The paradigm duly rested on two pillars: the party and the security apparatus supported by laws, decrees and institutions, such as the emergency law and state security courts, with the president at the top and extensive powers vested in him through the constitution. Hafez al-Asad liked to call himself a man of institutions[51] and he wanted to give his regime some semblance of institutional legalism.

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46 Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton University Press 1987), 237.

47 Seale, Patrick, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1989, 118.

48 Ibid., 169.

49 George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom.* London and New York: Zed Books 2003, 10.

50 Moshe Ma'oz, "Attempts to Create a Political Community in Modern Syria", Ilan Pappé and Moshe Ma'oz (eds.) *Middle East Politics and Ideas: A History from within*, London: I. B. Tauris 1997, 224.

51 Seale, Patrick, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1989, 174.

However, in the constitution, freedom of expression was subordinated to the ideology of state and society.[52]

The constitution of 1973 ostensibly guaranteed citizens' freedom but the problem, as noted by Alan George, was that the law included a decree from 1963 declaring a state of emergency in response to the military threat from Israel. In reality, it gave a free hand to crush the regime's domestic opponents. This law also established special security courts, which gave virtually unchecked powers to the security agencies, thereby making the enshrined constitutional guarantees of human and civil rights in reality null and void.[53] Syria was tightly securitised in Asad's consolidation of power. No mercy was given to opponents and the initial relief expressed upon Asad's seizure of power gave way to a tightly controlled daily life for Syrians.

The Amnesty Report of 1979 gives credit, however, to Asad's governance for increased stability in Syria.[54] The same report estimated that the total number of untried political detainees was at least 350 at any one time, rising to as many as 1,000 on occasions. The great majority were detained without trial under emergency legislation.[55] Nine deaths were reported between 1975-1977 as a result of torture in Syrian prisons.[56] The Muslim Brotherhood rebellion that culminated in Hama in 1982, as dealt with in the next section, resulted in an increase in political prisoners. Some 7,500 continued to languish in Syrian jails at the end of 1990. Of these, at least 2,500 were held in Tadmur Military Prison, notorious for its bad conditions and the harsh treatment that prisoners received.[57]

The initial relief on the part of Syrian society that greeted Hafez al-Asad's inauguration as president was soon followed by fear. The wars of 1967 and 1973 against Israel gave Asad a convenient external threat around which to design his security paradigm, a paradigm purported to be based principally upon harnessing domestic opposition and creating stability. But the security paradigm did not succeed in quelling domestic opposition and the instability continued. The failure to win over the Sunni Muslim majority also eroded the legitimacy of Asad's rule.

2.3 Uprising spearheaded by Islamists

Islamic opposition started to gain ground after the mid-1970s and the movement's rebellion against Asad's regime duly spread nationwide, culminating in its merciless end in the city of Hama in 1982. Conservative Islamists were opponents of the secular regime and an additional trigger came in 1976 when Asad intervened in Lebanon on the side of the Christians. The wide support Hafez al-Asad had enjoyed after his bloodless coup in 1970, and the stability he brought, began to show signs of erosion also as a result of economic stagnation and corruption, especially by regime cronies.[58] The Muslim

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52   AHDR 2009, 58.

53   George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London and New York: Zed Books 2003, 12.

54   Syria. Amnesty International Briefing 1979, 3.

55   Syria. Amnesty International Briefing 1979, 7.

56   Syria. Amnesty International Briefing 1979, 13.

57   Human Rights Watch 1990. Syria and Syrian Occupied Lebanon. Human Rights Development, 1.

58   Seale, Patrick, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1989, 319.

Brotherhood launched a campaign of assassinations of senior Alawi and regime figures, and bombings of regime symbols.[59]

The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria had its roots in the social welfare societies of the 1930s and maintained, from its inception in 1945-46, very close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Organisationally, they were similar and considered constituting a single movement with independent administrations and autonomy.[60]

In 1980 Asad himself became the target of a failed assassination attempt. The Seventh Regional Conference of the Ba'th party gave Rifaat al-Asad, the president's brother, a free hand to deal with the uprising. He did so with an iron fist, duly quelling the uprising. This not only succeeded in crushing a long and bloody uprising violently, but also crucially transformed the character of Asad's regime, as Patrick Seale has observed.[61] In retrospect, the violent crushing of the uprising at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s was a prelude to the *modus operandi* applied by the regime of Bashar al-Asad in the present and ongoing civil war in Syria.

The Hama bombing and crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood was in line with the regime's security paradigm in dealing with the uprising: lukewarm promises of reforms did not work, therefore the uprising had to be crushed. The methods were not significantly different from those adopted by the French in 1925. The number of those killed in Hama has never been verified, but Seale estimates a figure of 5,000-10,000 as being close to the truth.[62] The regime had hovered on the brink of a sectarian civil war for five years and the feeling of insecurity among Syrians was widespread.

It was the Hama experience which, more than anything else, consolidated the security paradigm Hafez al-Asad had set. The threat against him was at least as much an internal as an external one. The military ruling elite, and ruthless secret police became so intertwined that it became impossible to separate the Assad regime from the security establishment.[63] The regime and the security establishment fused into one and became fully consolidated. Asad realised he had not succeeded in ridding society of the instability that was so endemic in the early decades of independence.

Stability was gradually restored. The numbers of political prisoners had peaked but the figures started to decrease significantly during the 1990s, the last decade of the Hafez al-Asad regime. Hundreds of political prisoners still remained behind bars, but they no longer numbered in the thousands. Many of the detainees were serving 10- to 15-year sentences imposed after unfair trials in the security court, a decision that could not be repealed by a higher tribunal.[64]

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59 George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom.* London and New York: Zed Books 2003, 15.

60 Umar F. Abd–Allah, The Islamic Struggle in Syria (Mizan Press, Berkeley 1983), 90–91.

61 Seale, Patrick, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1989, 327.

62 Ibid., 334.

63 Bröning, Michael, "The Sturdy House That Assad Built: Why Damascus is Not Cairo." *Foreign Affairs*, March 7, 2011.

64 Human Rights Watch 1999. Syria: Human Rights Development, 2.

2.4 From thaw to total failure

Civil society in Syria, meticulously suppressed over the decades, started to flourish in what became known as the Damascus Spring, after Bashar al-Asad was elected president in 2001. Civil society in Syria wanted a multi-party democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and a free press. Likewise, they demanded an end to the state of emergency that had been in place since 1963.[65]

The political thaw was tangible as some 600 political prisoners were released in November 2000, most of whom were members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, bringing the total number of political detainees from 1,500 down to some 900 soon after Bashar al-Asad became president.[66] Syria continued to support freedom of religion and women's rights to a greater extent than many other countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Soon, however, the regime saw the civil society movement as a threat. The regime altered course and opted only for economic reforms and not political ones, as promised earlier. The movement for change was quickly curtailed when, in mid-February 2001, organisers of civil society forums began to be required to obtain formal permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs.[67] The Damascus spring turned into winter and the mechanism of coercive security remained unchanged. Amnesty International stated in its briefing to the Human Rights Committee that the mechanisms facilitating human rights violations, as provided for under the emergency legislation, including the excessive powers given to the security forces, were still intact. Hence, any persons known to belong, or suspected of belonging, to an opposition group risked arrest, detention and torture, or the curtailment of their freedom one way or another.[68]

Many Syrians, however, perceived a relaxation in the security compared to Hafez al-Asad's era. American anthropologist John Borneman observed that Damascus had become a more open city with a mix of foreigners and Syrians. This marked a clear difference compared to his first visit to Damascus in 1979, then under the presidency of Hafez al-Asad. At that time, an omnipresent security apparatus was visible.[69] Syria was gradually opening up, international trade and business was increasing, Syria's political isolation was relaxing and tourism was on the increase. The overall development, irrespective of the lack of genuine political reforms, was a positive one, especially bearing in mind the stifling and suppressive years of the 1980s and 1990s. President Bashar al-Asad enjoyed general popularity, was held in high esteem, and was supported.

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65   George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London and New York: Zed Books 2003, x.

66   David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus. Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2005), 84–85. See also Amnesty International: Syrian Arab Republic. Briefing to the Human Rights Committee 71st session – March 2001. For the sake of comparison in the Middle East, it is noteworthy to observe that at the same time Egypt had about 18,000, Algeria between 4,000–7,000 and Turkey between 10,000–20,000 political prisoners. Some of these countries were close allies of the United States.

67   George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London and New York: Zed Books 2003, 50.

68   Amnesty International: Syrian Arab Republic. Briefing to the Human Rights Committee 71st session – March 2001.

69   John Borneman, *Syrian Episodes: Sons, Fathers, and an Anthropologist in Aleppo* (Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press 2007), xxiii–xxiv. This is also my own observation based on many discussions with Syrians in Damascus in 2011.

Asad therefore had every reason to believe what he stated in an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of January 2011, namely that *only states with policies at odds with their people's views are unstable* and that uprisings in other parts of the Arab world would not reach Syria.[70] In hindsight, the president was writing his regime's verdict on the wall. The fact that the uprising did reach Syria, and the force with which it struck, has a lot to do with the security paradigm Syria had been exercising since the ascendancy to power of the Ba'th party and the creation of security authorities anchored in the emergency laws since 1963, and especially in the authoritarian security consolidation created by Hafez al-Asad.

The security paradigm, and the mechanisms and methods of which it is comprised, gave unchecked powers and authority to security organs. This paved the way, almost as if by the laws of nature, for the violent and very short-sighted reaction by the regime, and especially its security organs, to some anti-regime graffiti daubed on the walls of the small provincial town of Dera in February 2011. The people who took to the streets were encouraged and motivated by the examples of popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The fear factor didn't work as the regime expected and the Syrian people began to demand tangible reforms of the political system and an end to the endemic corruption, propagated by the president himself. The ousting of the president was not among the demands during the first spring of the uprising.

What started as a popular and peaceful uprising in March 2011 turned into civil war as a result of violent and indiscriminate suppression by the regime and the armed opposition's response to the suppression. This spelled the final failure of the security paradigm so carefully designed, built and sustained in Syria to suppress internal instability. The paradigm that had been constructed could neither protect the people nor the state.

Without doubt, the main responsibility for the bloody and costly civil war lies with the regime and its initial violent response to mainly peaceful protests, as well as half-hearted promises of a number of reforms, including the nullification of the state emergency law. But by the same token, the cycle of violence has continued to intensify as opponents of the regime, with substantial logistical and financial support from some of the regional states like Saudi Arabia, have turned increasingly to arms, showing no more intent to protect human beings than the regime. Population centres were utilised by the armed opposition, which drew the regime's harsh security and military response to urban areas. In its fight against the regime, the armed opposition, including numerous Islamist groups with many foreign fighters, did not adhere to any human security principles. Just like the regime, albeit in quantitatively fewer cases due to the lack of heavy weaponry, it committed human rights violations.

At the time of writing, in late 2013, there is a full-fledged civil war in Syria with regional dimensions, and the total absence of security is striking, whichever way it is measured. In addition to the loss in terms of human lives, the material destruction as well as the psychological impact of the ongoing war is incalculable.

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70   Quoted in the *Daily Star*, 1 Feb 2011.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Syria is presently in the middle of a civil war. Ultimately, its security paradigm has played a significant role in contributing to the demise of the country and its people. A number of citizens have turned to foreign powers in order to bring the regime down, just as the AHDR foresees in conditions of limited freedom and excessive state security.[71] A variety of actors and factors contributing to security have been part of the intertwined, multi-layered and complex security paradigm in which human security has been strikingly conspicuous by its absence.

Syria is a relatively big country in a crucial geostrategic location in the Middle East. It has suffered from the coercive Mandate authority, creating insecurity, as well as from internal instability during its first decades as an independent country. The consolidation of the security paradigm with the coercive twist by Hafez al-Asad did not succeed in preventing the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. A perpetual state of war with Israel, with armed conflicts in 1967 and 1973, in addition to the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel, provided an external threat and pretext for tightening internal security while simultaneously providing a pretext for a security paradigm among the populace.

Another initial burden was a long engagement in Lebanon during the civil war, until the final withdrawal in 2005, following the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri. Concurrently, Syria was witnessing a rapid growth in its population from some 1.5 million inhabitants at the beginning of the Mandate era in the 1920s to the present-day figure of some 24 million inhabitants, alongside transformation from a peasant society to a relatively developed and modern urban society. Syria's contemporary history, above all, has been one of instability with rare, relatively short periods of stability.

This extremely complex setting must be taken into account in analysing the state of security in Syria, which was built upon authoritarian governance apart from a short period of democracy in the 1940s. These complexities add to Syria's vulnerability, but they cannot be taken as the reasons *per se* for the civil war. By their nature, the complexities include factors that can easily be utilised in the destabilisation of the regime and its security paradigm from within. Strengthening stability with an iron fist in the 1970s and 80s led to increased fear among the population; and to a conscious or subconscious awareness of the red lines that were not to be crossed. The Syrian regime regarded stability as security. The security was harnessed to serve stability and consequently to safeguard the regime. This security paradigm permeated the fabric of society to such a great extent that even many Syrians seemed to perceive stability as security.

To return now to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: What exactly contributed to the failure of the security paradigm in Syria? Was it because of the coercive authoritarian regime, or the overall complex security landscape, or maybe a combination of all those factors resulting in a lack of human security in general? It should be noted, however, that Syria was not in any way an exception among the Arab Middle East countries and its situation did not differ significantly from that of most of the Arab countries in the Middle East.

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71   AHDR 2009, 24.

At the beginning of this paper, the AHDR's criteria for measuring human security were highlighted. Syria's compliance with international human rights charters has been little more than hollow rhetoric, as human rights organisations have shown during recent decades, although signs of improvement have also been noted, such as decreases in the number of political prisoners. In general, the fear factor so deeply embedded in Hafez al-Asad's regime was also relenting. In this regard, a gradual improvement is to be recognised. The vast majority of Syrians were able to conduct quite normal lives, even living with a degree of human security, so long as the red lines were not crossed. In terms of economic security, food security, healthcare, access to education, and personal and community security – all aspects of human security too – the situation hovered somewhere between good and satisfactory.

This modest but noticeable trend of improvement was, however, hampered by the absence of institutional reforms, which allowed the unchecked abuse of power to continue. Johan Galtung's definition of structural violence is apt in the case of Syria: *The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.*[72] Syria's state security courts were prime examples of institutions where power is inbuilt, allowing violations of human rights irrespective of what is enshrined in the constitution. Institutional checks and balances have more often allowed abuses of power than prevented them.

Some positive developments during the rule of Bashar al-Asad were not enough to prevent Syria's people from becoming alienated from the regime – the same feeling as that evinced towards the French during the Mandate era. Endemic corruption, as well as coercion and patronage, were perhaps the most visible – and felt – manifestation of the abuse of power for the general public, much more than hundreds of political detainees. The first criterion for the measurement of human security proposed by the AHDR 2009 is the acceptability of the state in the minds of its own citizens, and in Syria the state has lost its acceptability for a significant part of its population. Legitimacy, a human security principle, has been lost.

It appears that the coerciveness of authoritarian governance and its perceived security needs and designs are incompatible with basic principles of human security like human rights and legitimacy. The coerciveness creates discontent, leading to instability and insecurity, and triggering opposition to the regime. The regime's efforts to contain this opposition by coercive measures only deepen the instability. The authoritarian security paradigm is prevented by its narrowness and state centralism from identifying the deeper, underlying threats and causes of instability, which stem from the absence of human security. Therefore, a linkage exists between popular uprisings and human insecurity in authoritarian states.

The authoritarian security paradigm is, in fact, a double failure. Instead of sustainable security, the state threatens itself as it triggers perpetual opposition and uprisings almost as if they were in-built counter-reactions; and for its people it does not create freedom from fear. Syria's security paradigm failed although some spheres of security and safety must be acknowledged (stability within instability), as must freedom, but almost never without the fear of crossing the 'red lines'.

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72   Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (1969), 171.

The present civil war is a lamentable breach of human security by all warring sides. The armed militias are – judging by their violent actions – including population centres in their points of resistance, and not honouring human security principles any more than the regime.

Syria is an example of how the absence of certain key human security principles throughout its contemporary history has contributed to the failure of the whole security paradigm: the very principle on which state and society were built. A lesson can be drawn about rebuilding the security system on the basis of human security principles not only in Syria, but also in the Arab world at large. Irrespective of the criticism of human security, such as not being unanimously defined or lacking the capability to replace the international security system, it contains crucial elements that can assist in creating and sustaining conditions in Arab societies with genuinely representative and legitimate institutions.

Applying human security does not require *a priori* acceptance of a paradigm shift in the international security system. Human security may, over time, transform the international security system through its practice rather than its imposition top-down. Human security can therefore be seen as putting people's security concerns first and preventing abuses of power. The AHDR definition of human security is based on circumstances and conditions in the Arab world. It consequently provides a solid base on which to build human security-centred security systems and institutions. These principles are of paramount importance for reforming the security sectors in the Arab world.

Human security governance does not replace state security but it considers state security in a way that ultimately makes security collapse and human suffering, such as that in Syria, more unlikely. Criticism of human security should not be an excuse for its non-practice. If practice demonstrates the concept's validity, then the importance of an agreed definition becomes secondary. On a final note, Kyle Grayson's view of treating human security as an *ethos* rather than an agenda for slotting into the existing security paradigm is worth considering.[73] Acknowledging the ethos of human security as a key principle for sustainable security sector reform may prove to be more important than a disputed definition.

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73 Quoted in Christie Ryerson, "Critical Voices and Human Security". *Security Dialogue* vol. 41, no. 2, April 2010. Original: Kyle Grayson, "Securitization and the Boomerang Debate: A Rejoinder to Liotta and Smith-Windsor", *Security Dialogue* 34(3), 340.