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Torture under the Regime of Bashar al-Assad: Two Decades of Failed Human Rights Campaigns and Foreign Interference in Syria

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Introduction

In 2016, Amnesty International published a report that documented the systematic hanging of inmates at Syria's Saydnaya prison. On the first page, in bold, the report reads, "Saydnaya is the end of life- the end of humanity."[1] The report details the beatings, rape, and death of over 17,000 inmates since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011.[2] Initially, it appears that the horrors of the Assad regime are nothing new, just a continuing legacy of leaders in Syria using state-sponsored torture to maintain their despotic reign.[3] Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, was famous for his imprisonment of thousands of political opponents. One of his prisons, Tadmur, was considered "a punitive institution in the form of a concentration camp- a live demonstration of intimidation, terror, torture and killing."[4]

Despite the history of torture under the Assad regime, the recent violations do come as a surprise, because unlike under Hafez al-Assad, in 2011, the people of Syria finally said enough to this violence. As the Arab Spring swept through the region, thousands of protestors took to the streets asking for Assad to step down and end his tyranny. Amnesty International, Syrian NGOs, the United States, and even defectors from inside the government all stood up to Assad. However, in 2018, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that approximately 104,000 individuals and counting had still been tortured to death in Syrian prisons since 2011.[5]

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[1] Amnesty International, *Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria* (London: Amnesty International, 2017), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2454152017ENGLISH.PDF, 5.

[2] Ibid.

[3] It should be noted that this paper will be focusing on torture that can be defined as "an act committed by a person acting under the color of law specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering (other than pain or suffering incidental to lawful sanctions) upon another person within his custody or physical control." (Office of Legal Counsel, "Definition of Torture Under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340–2340A," *The United States Department of Justice,* 2004, https://www.justice.gov/file/18791/download.)

[4] Amnesty International, *SYRIA: Torture, despair and dehumanization in Tadmur Military Prison* (London: Amnesty International, 2001), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/132000/mde240142001en.pdf, 10.

[5] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Syria: 560,000 killed in seven yrs of war, SOHR," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, December 12, 2018, website available in bibliography.

Why did these actors fail to stop Bashar al-Assad from practicing state-sponsored torture? Why could he openly commit crimes against humanity during the Arab Spring and the following civil war?

At first these answers seem impossible to find, but, in reality, similar to how there is a long history of torture in Syria, there is also a long history of Bashar al-Assad evading condemnation and punishment for the use of violence against his own citizens. The Arab Spring was not the first time that the Syrian people attempted to confront Bashar al-Assad about the state's repression.[6] In 2000, a group of Syrian intellectuals, in a movement referred to as the Damascus Spring, mobilized and demanded major reforms of the Syrian government. While the movement was physically much smaller than the Arab Spring, and the activists did not go as far as demanding regime change, they did pressure Assad to respect human rights. Nevertheless, this campaign also failed to change the practice of state-sponsored torture in Syria. Therefore, the previous questions should read: *Why has Bashar al-Assad never been stopped from using state-sponsored torture? Why has he been able to openly commit crimes against humanity for two decades?*

In order to answer these questions, the following chapter will review the literature on human rights movements and contentious politics. This information will be used to create a model that explains what is required for a human rights movement to be successful during a period of contention. The model will be applied to Syria through a comparison of the human rights campaigns during the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. It will show that Bashar al-Assad has been able to practice state-sponsored torture because of the interference of Syria's

[6] For the purposes of this paper the Syrian state or the Assad regime refers to the Assad family, senior aides, the Baath Party, and the army and internal security apparatus. Parliament and the rest of the government are controlled by the regime. (Federal Research Division, "Country Profile: Syria," *Library of Congress*, April 2005, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Syria-new.pdf).

allies. Opposition groups have implemented a variety of strategies to pressure the Assad regime, but all of these tactics have ultimately failed because Syria's geopolitical importance ensures that its foreign allies will protect the state at all costs.

Chapter 1: Modeling Human Rights Campaigns in Periods of Contentious Politics

Theoretical Background

The study of human rights is still a relatively new field of political science. Much of what is understood about the methods of achieving compliance with these social norms was discovered in the latter half of the twentieth century when human rights advocacy networks started to appear in the 1970s.[7] In 1999, Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink introduced a new theory on human rights referred to as the "spiral model" in *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Changes.* This theory claims that for a human rights campaign to be successful, there needs to be a combination of pressure from above, or outside of the state, and pressure from below, or domestic movements. The actors that traditionally apply pressure from above include international NGOs, international governing bodies, and other foreign countries. The actors that traditionally apply pressure from below include domestic NGOs, local governing bodies, and protestors. According to the "spiral model," these two sources of pressure must work together in order to force a state to commit and then comply with human rights norms.

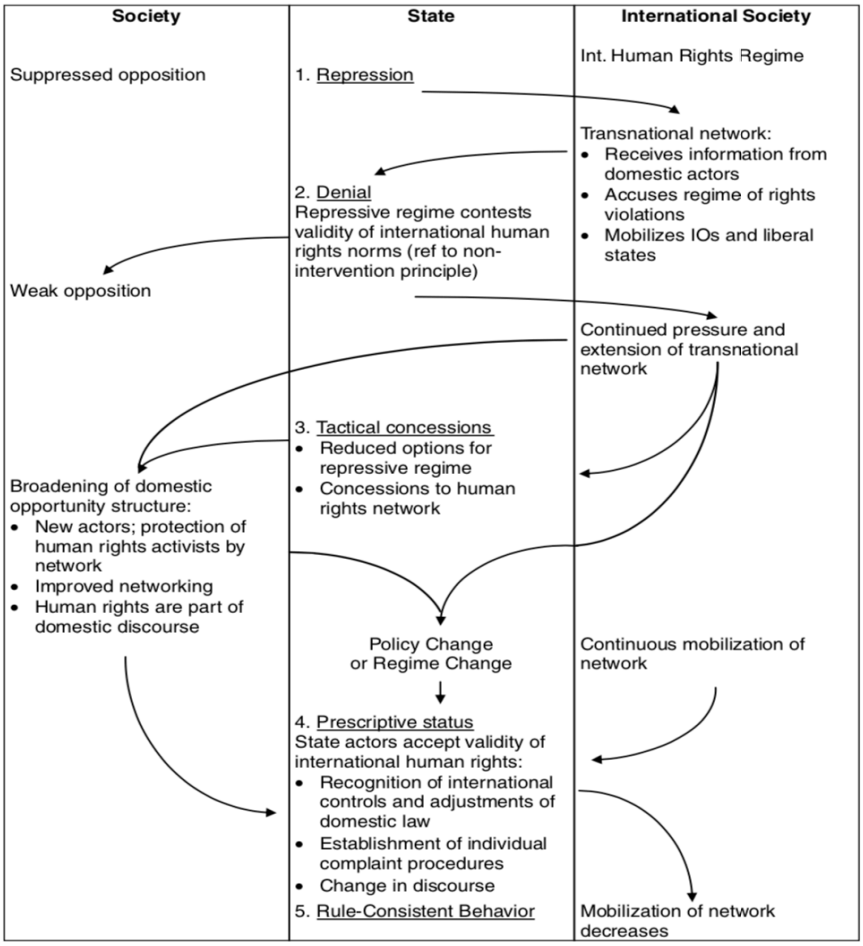
The Five Phases

Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink identify five phases through which a state passes as it shifts from commitment to compliance. These phases represent different levels of mobilization by various actors and different levels of reform enacted by the state. The figure on the following page diagrams the five phases of the "spiral model." The initial phase is that of repression, in which governments are able to freely violate human rights. Domestic and international actors are

[7] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1998), 84-85.

unable to mobilize because of a limitation on their freedom to assemble and their access to information about the country.[8] Regardless of the intensity of the repression enforced by the state, there is often a major violation such as a massacre that catches the attention of the international community.[9]

Figure 1: The "Spiral Model"



Source: *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Changes*[10]

[8] Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, "The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: introduction," in *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change,* edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 20.

The state dismisses its involvement in this event as part of the second phase, denial. Yet, the abuse still motivates other nations to apply intense pressure from outside the country via "information politics."[11] Eventually the state should become so vulnerable that it will be forced to make reforms because its foreign allies begin to waiver in their support. These reforms begin what is known as the phase of tactical concessions, which is when the state makes a limited effort to appease the opposition by passing unsubstantial human rights legislation. Often states will allow for limited investigations, or create benign working groups that focus on human rights. These concessions are considered "low cost,"[12] but they facilitate the mobilization of domestic movements.

Through the combined efforts of domestic and international actors, these concessions expand until human rights initiatives are granted prescriptive status, which is the fourth phase of the model. According to Risse and Ropp, prescriptive status includes, "ratifying relevant international treaties and their optional protocols, changing relevant domestic laws, setting up domestic human rights institutions, and regularly referring to human rights norms in the state administrative and bureaucratic discourse."[13] It is important to note that some of these reforms may also occur during the tactical concessions phase, but what distinguishes these two phases is the internal dialogue on human rights that the state initiates during the prescriptive status phase. In this fourth phase, the state should be able to monitor itself to some degree, and not always rely on the condemnation of outsiders to motivate it to act. In the environment of sustained pressure

[11] Information politics is "the ability to quickly and credibly generate politically useable information and move it to where it will have the most impact." The information is used to target a state, organization, or individual by damaging their reputation through the public's awareness of their crimes or violations of social norms (Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, "The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices,16).
[12] Thomas Risse and Stephan Ropp,"Introduction and Overview," in *The Perisistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance,* edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.
[13] Ibid, 7.

from above and below, this prescriptive status phase will evolve into the state adhering to rule-consistent behavior. This is the last phase of the spiral model, when there are little to no violations of human rights because the state is willing and adequately able to monitor itself.[14]

In order to better understand the "spiral model," it can be helpful to offer an example of a country, like Morocco, that has clearly passed through several of these phases. Before 1990, Morocco was in the phase of repression under the control of King Hassan II. Human Rights Watch wrote in their 1989 World Report that, "torture and other forms of cruel treatment by police authorities [were used] to extract confessions from detainees and punish prisoners accused of both ordinary and political claims."[15] However, just one year later, Morocco dramatically changed its stance on human rights. Human Rights Watch reported in 1990 that, "a number of developments put human rights in Morocco on the national and international agenda as never before."[16]

This rapid change in Morocco's stance on human rights is often attributed to the publication of the book, *Notre Ami le Roi* by Gilles Perrault. This book includes documentation of the poor treatment of political prisoners at Tazmamart prison during the reign of King Hassan II. [17] Its publication served a similar role to that of massacre in the denial phase, because it drew the attention of the international community to the abuses of the state. It became extremely popular in Europe, and after its publication, the European Parliament called "for the release of all

[14] Risse and Sikkink, "The socialization of international human rights norms," 34.
[15] Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 1989 – Morocco* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 1990), https://www.refworld.org/docid/467bb4941e.html.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Sieglinde Granzer, "Changing Discourse: Transnational Advocacy Networks in Tunisia and Morocco," in *The Power of Human Rights,* edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 122 and Gallimard, "GILLES PERRAULT Notre ami le roi," *Gallimard,* n.d., http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Folio/Folio-actuel/Notre-ami-le-roi.

political prisoners."[18] In 1992, the European Parliament also denied an aid package to Morocco because of its poor human rights record.[19] In response to this pressure from above, Morocco undertook the tactical concessions of forming the Conseil Consultative des Droits de l'Homme (Advisory Council on Human Rights) in 1990 and establishing the Ministry for Human Rights in 1993.[20] Despite these reforms, Morocco is still making similar concessions,[21] and torture is still being practiced.[22] Therefore, Morocco is stuck in the tactical concessions phase, and there needs to be more pressure from above applied on the state. Countries like the United States have permitted and even encouraged the practice of torture against Islamists in Morocco in order to benefit their own War on Terror.[23].

Contentious Politics

In contrast to the example of Morocco, the "spiral model" alone cannot explain why Bashar al-Assad has not complied with human rights norms. The original "spiral model" does not consider human rights campaigns that stem from an uprising like the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. Instead, the original "spiral model" focuses on campaigns that emerge from the denial phase, which is when a massacre or scandal leads to international mobilization. This event only mobilizes international actors, as their efforts are necessary in creating a liberal opening

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[18] Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 1992 - Morocco* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 1992), https://www.refworld.org/docid/467fca5bc.html.
[19] Ottaway Meredith and Marina Riley, "Morocco: From Top-down Reform to Democratic Transition?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* September 2006, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp71_ottaway_final.pdf, 6.
[20] Granzer, "Changing Discourse," 124-125.
[21] Vera Van Hüllen, "The 'Arab Spring' and the spiral model: Tunisia and Morocco," in *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance,* edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), 188.
[22] V-DEM: Varieties of Democracy, "Country Graph," published by the University of Gothenburg, 2019, https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/.
[23]Aida Alami, "How the persecution of Islamists across North Africa, in the name of fighting terrorism, is sowing the seeds for future instability," *Foreign Policy,* April 9, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/04/09/moroccos-misguided-war-on-terror-2/ and Aida Alami, "Torture Still Widely Used in Morocco, Amnesty International Says." *The New York Times,* May 19, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/world/africa/torture-still-widely-used-in-morocco-amnesty-international-says.html.

through which domestic actors can organize safely and effectively. However, an uprising ignites domestic and international mobilization simultaneously, and therefore it is different from the events that are typically associated with the denial phase. Furthermore, the original "spiral model" does not apply to countries that are engaged in civil war, like Syria after 2011. A wartime atmosphere changes the state's mentality, because as R. J. Rummel explains, a war allows for a state to implement its own nationalist agenda by means of eliminating opposition forces that have been a long-time threat to the regime. A new cost-benefit analysis develops whereby the state can justify using violence against the opposition as of part of their wartime strategy, instead of being forced to rely on negotiation as the only practical option.[24] Therefore, the state is less likely to make reforms when they have the option to physically repress the opposition.

These additional conditions in Syria require that the theories of contentious politics be applied to the original "spiral model." Scholars Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly developed a model of the classic social movement agenda for explaining contentious politics in *Dynamics of Contention*. Their model suggests that there are various elements involved in a contentious action, beginning with a social change. While they do not specifically define social change, the authors provide the example of the social change that led to the Mau Mau Revolt in Kenya. The land crisis in Kenya and trend toward decolonization that followed WWII inspired the armed insurrections of the Kikuyu freedom fighters.[25] The fighters were

[24] R. J. Rummel, "Democracy, Power, Genocide, and Mass Murder," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 1 (1995): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174320.
[25] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 93-95.

angry over white immigration and the British Home Office was relaxing their colonial policies, giving the opposition both the means and motive to mobilize.[26]

The mobilizing structures generated by a social change include both formal movements and everyday social networks.[27] The purpose of these structures is to frame the movement as an opportunity for their supporters and a threat to the enemy, which is often the state. The mobilizing structures create these opportunities and threats via repertoires of contention, which are defined as, "the array of means by which participants in contentious politics make collective claims." [28] The better suited these repertoires are to the given mobilizing structures, the more effective they will be in creating opportunities for the opposition and threats for the enemy. For example, if the mobilizing structure was an everyday social network, then social media and public demonstrations would be good repertoires of contention as they are accessible to a wider audience. However, something like a newspaper column, which only engages the literate and affluent, would result in the limited mobilization of an everyday social network.

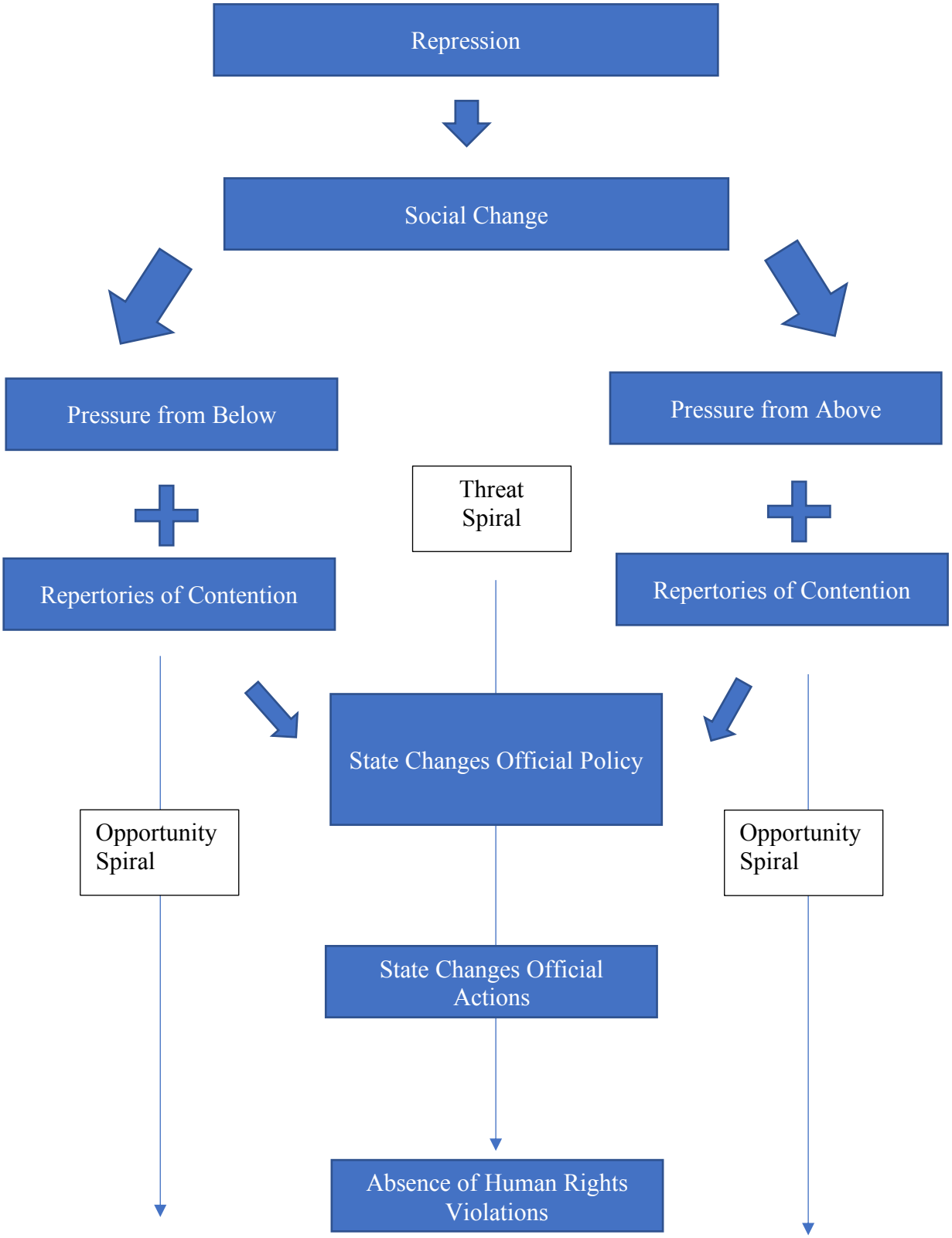
The classic social movement agenda for explaining contentious politics leaves out another important element which is discussed later in the book, opportunity and threat spirals. Opportunity and threat spirals are the continuous loops of environment-changing action taken by participants in contentious politics.[29] If an actor is successful in creating an opportunity for themselves, then it should increase the size of their mobilizing structure or improve their communication, providing another opportunity for that movement to take collective action. If an actor is threatened, then it should decrease the size of their mobilizing structure or fragment their communication, making it easier for that movement to be threatened again. Since the actions of

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 14.
[28] McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 17.
[29] Ibid, 243.

one side of a contentious movement change the environment of the other side, ideally, the opportunities created by a campaign should simultaneously threaten their enemy. Thus, an opportunity spiral for the opposition, leads to a threat spiral for the state, resulting in the success of the movement.

With a better understanding of contentious politics, one is now able to combine its key elements with the phases and actors of the original "spiral model." This new model will be able to adequately examine why human rights campaigns have repeatedly failed to prevent the practice of torture in Syria. This new model begins with the phase of repression, like the original "spiral model," but then it moves into the phase of social change. The social change initiates the onset of two mobilizing structures, which are associated with pressure from below and pressure from above. The mobilizing structures use repertoires of contention to take collective action. If these activities generate widespread support, especially among populations that have been loyal to the state, they should produce opportunity spirals. As the opportunity spirals move on the side of the opposition, the threat spiral begins within the state. The opportunity and threat spirals should then pass through three phases; state changes official policy, state changes official actions, and the absence of human rights violations. These three phases are derived from the last three phases of the original "spiral model;" tactical concessions, prescriptive status, and rule-consistent behavior.

Figure 2: Contentious "Spiral Model"



Methodology

Now that the contentious "spiral model" has been outlined, it can be used to explain the failures of the human rights campaigns to end torture in Syria. The best way to determine which aspect of the campaign caused the failure is through a comparative analysis of two different human rights campaigns to end torture. The factor that changes identically in both models will be associated with the identical failed outcome in both campaigns. Two prominent human rights campaigns to end torture during the presidency of Bashar al-Assad were during the 2000 Damascus Spring and the 2011 Arab Spring. Neither one of these campaigns solely focused on eradicating torture, but they both included movements working to achieve reforms that would stop the practice. It should be noted that both of these events will be referred to as uprisings, but that term should not inherently be associated with armed insurrection of violence. Instead, it means an "instance of rising up"[30] which manifests itself in both political and physical action. The following figures summarize the contentious "spiral model" during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring.

[30] Merriam Webster, "Uprising," *Merriam Webster*, 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/uprising.

Figure 3: Contentious "Spiral Model" during the 2000 Damascus Spring

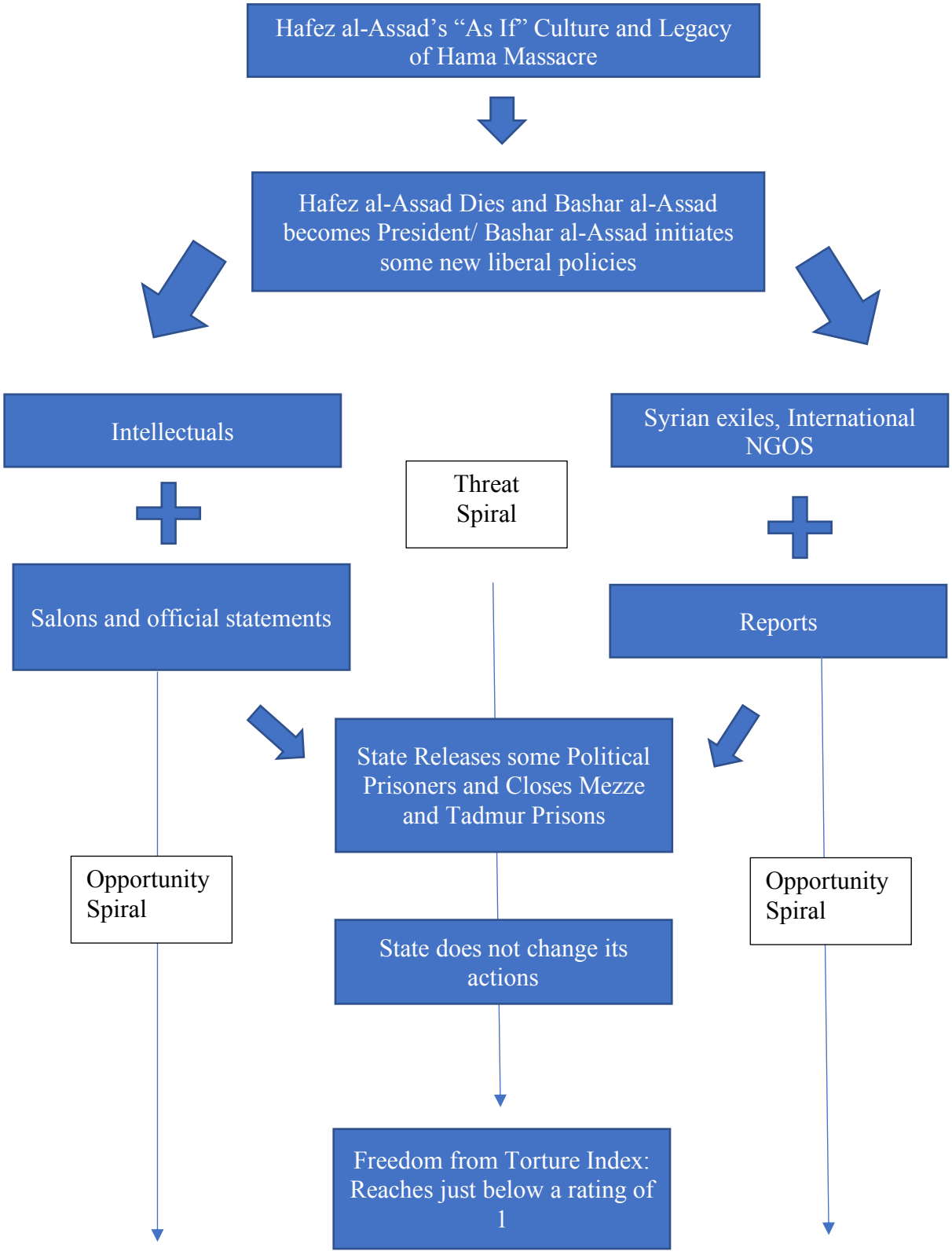
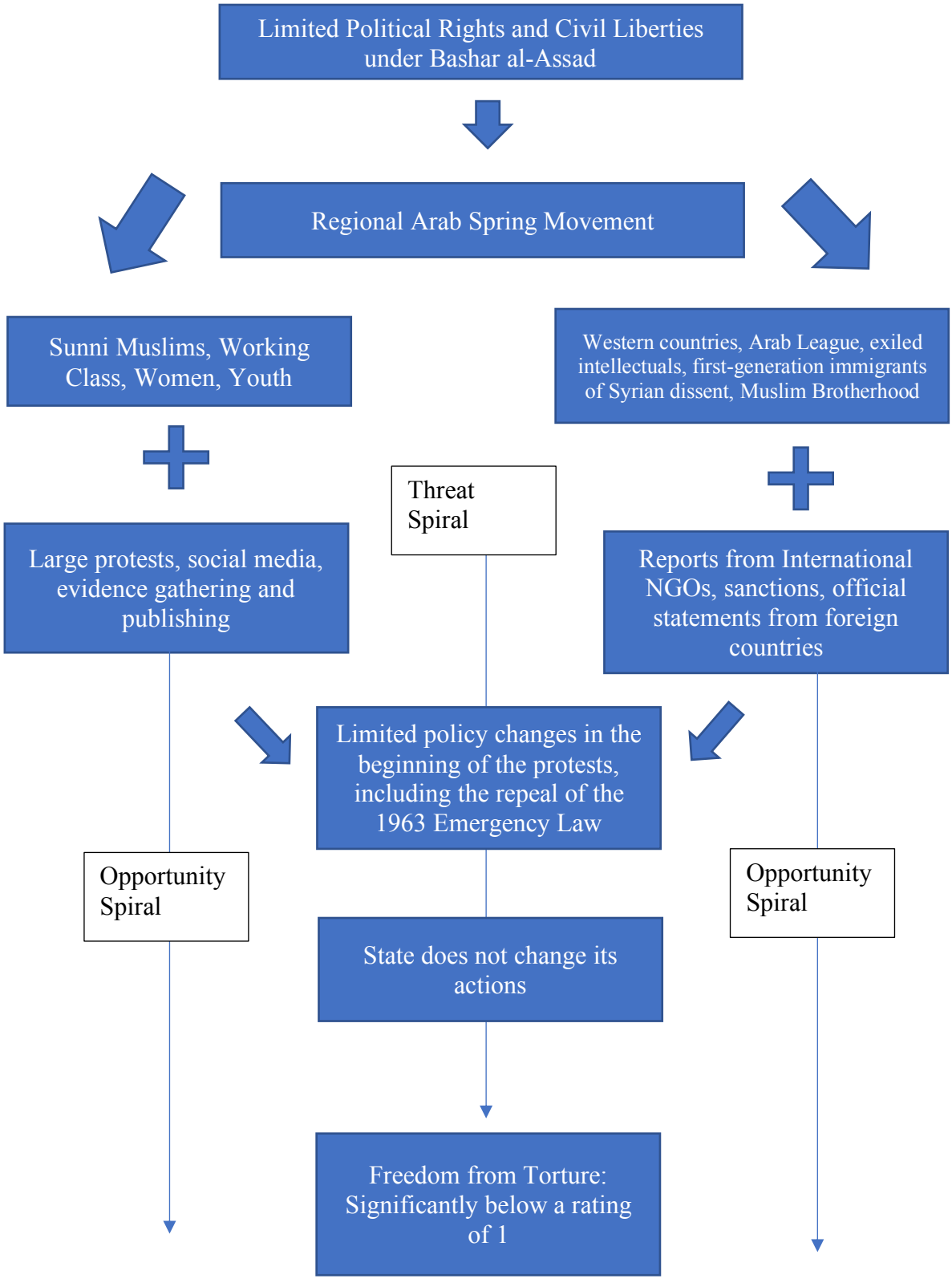


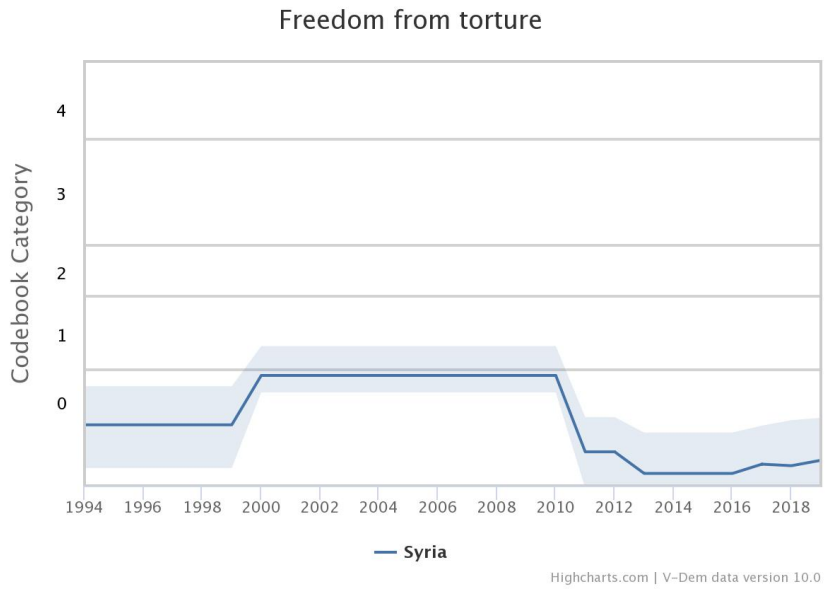
Figure 4: Contentious "Spiral Model" during the 2011 Arab Spring



The model for the Damascus Spring illustrates that Syria existed under the oppressive leadership of Hafez al-Assad until his death in 2000. This repressive phase was temporarily disrupted when his son took office and indicated a desire to democratize Syria. However, the mobilizing structures that developed out of this social change used rather limited repertoires of contention. The opportunities created for the opposition through their salon discussions and report writing did not pose a significant enough threat to the regime to start a threat spiral that would force the state to make reforms beyond basic policy changes. The closure of the prisons is considered a basic policy change because they were later reopened.[31] In contrast, during the Arab Spring, the social change brought about by the regional uprising in the Middle East created much more inclusive domestic and international mobilizing structures. The repertories of contention used by both of these groups appear to better facilitate widespread participation and create opportunities for the opposition to threaten the state. Large protests, evidence of torture, and sanctions were all collective actions that legitimately threatened the survival of the Assad regime. Surprisingly, these actions were still unable to initiate a sustained threat spiral that could force the state to make legitimate or meaningful reforms. Therefore, in both of the figures, neither the Damascus Spring or the Arab Spring resulted in an absence of human rights violations. The measure used to determine the level of improvement is referred to as the Freedom from Torture Index produced by V-DEM. It is a measure of both the frequency of torture and the systematic nature of the practice, ranked on a scale of 0 to 4.

[31] Anna Barnard, "Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/world/middleeast/syria-torture-prisons.html and The New Arab, "The darker side of Syria's Palmyra," *The New Arab*. May 21, 2015, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/5/21/the-darker-side-of-syrias-palmyra.

Figure 5: Freedom from Torture Index (Syria)



Source: V-DEM[32]

The Freedom from Torture Index shows that there is a slight increase in freedom from torture following the Damascus Spring in 2000, but there is a severe drop in the index after the 2011 Arab Spring. The minor policy changes that occurred in Syria during 2000 explain the slight improvement in the index, but in reality, the rating is so low during both uprisings that the outcome is effectively the same. The main difference between a rating of 1 and 0 is the level of direct government involvement.[33] Given the fact that the outcomes were very similar in both of the models, the factor that remains the same, in turn, should explain the outcome. However, there are no constant factors between the two models. The Damascus Spring presented an example of a movement with weak mobilizing structures and repertories of contention, while the Arab Spring appeared to have learned from those mistakes and implemented more effective methods.

[32] V-DEM: Varieties of Democracy, "Variable Graph," published by the University of Gothenburg, 2019, https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/.
[33] Ibid.

Therefore, it appears that there is another factor that has not been accounted for in the contentious "spiral model." This would be the factor of foreign alliances that was mentioned earlier in the introduction. In countries that follow the original "spiral model," foreign allies serve the purpose of initiating the tactical concessions phase, and so the more foreign allies a country has, the more the state will be pressured to make reforms. In Syria, on the other hand, the more nations that ally with the Assad regime, the less successful the human rights campaign. This is because while Syria is a weak country in terms of its economy and military, it has great geopolitical importance in the Middle East. Foreign countries that want influence in the region need to partner with Syria because of the nation's geographic location and its relationships with countries and organizations that fall on both sides of major conflicts in the Middle East. This dynamic means that Syria's allies will do almost anything to guarantee the survival of the Assad regime.

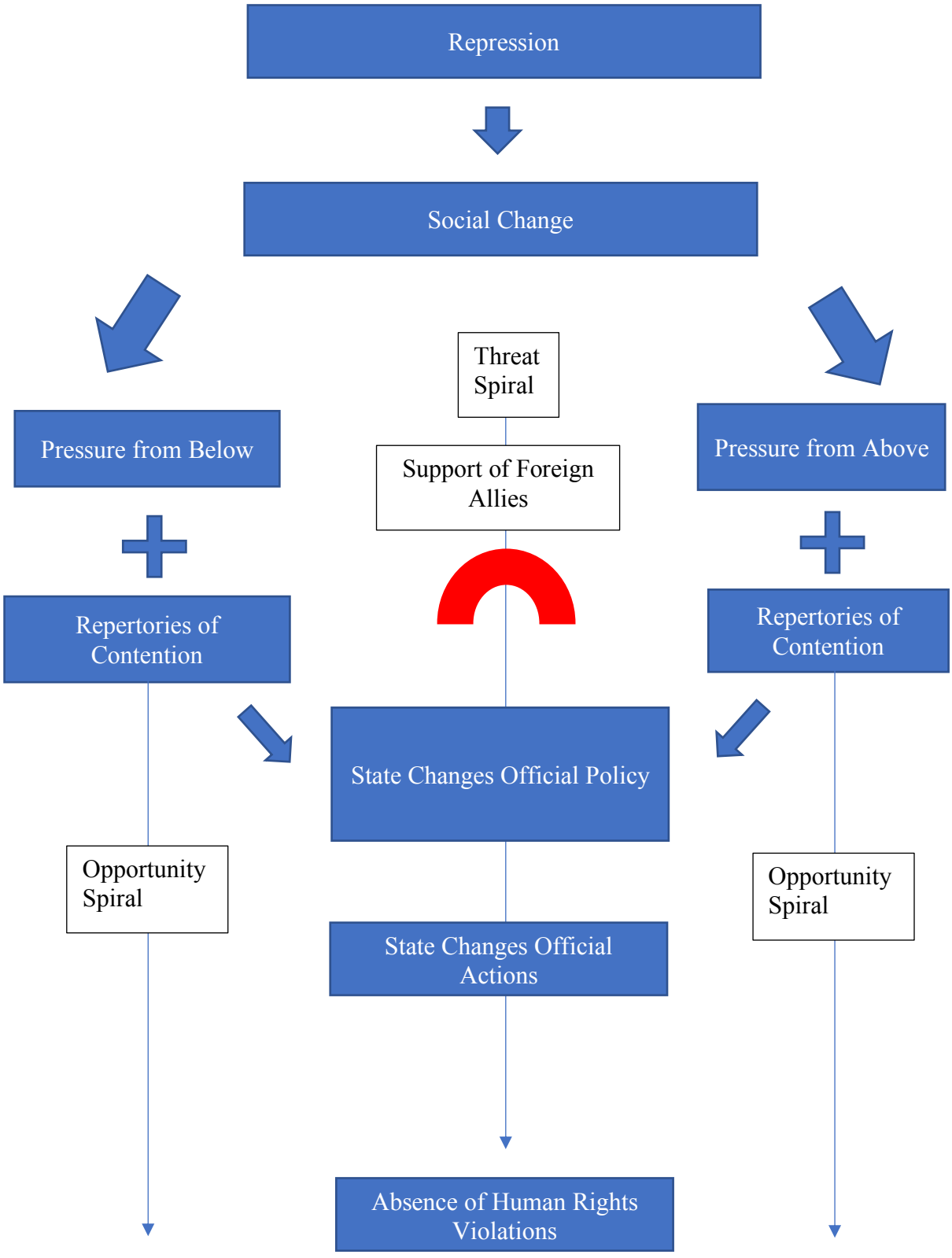
If Syria's allies protect the Assad regime, then the actions of domestic and international activists will not have their projected effect on the state, because this assistance destabilizes the balance of the opportunity and threat spirals. If the opposition threatens the state, then the regime can use the political, military, or economic assistance of its allies to backlash against the opposition in response to their actions. The opportunity spiral is no longer environment-changing, because the state is using artificial means to preserve its environment. Therefore, effective mobilizing structures can actually result in a weaker campaign, because it will prompt a backlash that will "break the upward spiral process… [The] domestic human rights movement is often relatively small and dependent on a handful of key leaders. Arresting or killing these leaders decapitates the movement and the resulting fear paralyzes it."[34] It should be noted that

[34] Risse and Sikkink, "The socialization of international human rights norms," 25.

this backlash is not just the outcome of the state generating its own opportunity spiral because if that was the case, then the state would become less dependent on the assistance of its allies as it becomes stronger, but that is the opposite of what has occurred.

In fact, Syria's foreign allies have been the deciding factor in the regime's survival for decades. They prevented the onset of the threat spiral within the state during the Damascus Spring by ignoring the arrests of the movement's key leaders and the closing of the new forums and associations. Countries like the United States were aware of the backlash that was occurring, but they chose to allow it because they needed the support of the Assad regime in other conflicts in the Middle East. The support of Syria's allies led to an even worse backlash during the Arab Spring, because these countries have become directly involved. Nations like Russia, Iran, and China have not only been giving Syria military equipment, but they have also used their political power to prevent international intervention to stop the violence. This intensification of support came as a response to the increased threat to the state posed by the opposition, especially after the onset of a civil war. The following figure illustrates the contentious "spiral model" with the additional factor of foreign alliances.

Figure 6: Contentious "Spiral Model" with the Factor of Foreign Alliances



The factor for the support of foreign allies is shaped like a magnet, because it attaches itself to the state and prevents the beginning of the threat spiral. The stronger the alliances, the stronger the magnet, and the greater the hinderance preventing the commencement of a threat spiral. Therefore, the state will not be threatened by the actions of the opposition unless its relationship with its allies' changes, because the state will have the resources required to deflect its enemies. The rest of this paper will examine the effect of foreign alliances on the human rights campaigns in Syria. The next chapter will take a broad look at how Syria's alliances affected the success of both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring in general. The chapter will identify the elements of the contentious "spiral model" that were present during each movement, showing that irrespective of the differences between the two uprisings, Syria's allies were able to prevent the onset of the threat spiral. The third chapter will then use this information to specifically examine how Syria's allies have prevented the success of human rights campaigns to end state-sponsored torture.

Chapter 2: General Application of the Contentious "Spiral Model" to the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring

In order to understand why Syria's allies have had such a profound impact on the ability of the opposition to achieve reforms, it is necessary to outline the elements of the contentious "spiral model" during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. This chapter will directly compare the elements of repression, social change, mobilizing structures, repertoires of contention, foreign alliances, and outcomes. It will become clear that the two uprisings themselves were vastly different. The Damascus Spring was an uprising limited by exclusive mobilizing structures and ineffective repertoires of contention, whereas the Arab Spring was characterized by large mobilizing structures that used innovative repertoires of contention. Nevertheless, the failure of both movements was caused by Syria's foreign allies. During the Damascus Spring, these allies ignored the regime's crackdown which fragmented the movement beyond repair, and during the Arab Spring, Syria's allies supported Assad's backlash both financially and militarily in order to destabilize the opposition. Therefore, Syrian opposition groups have been unable to initiate a threat spiral within the state because as soon as they begin to achieve opportunities, the regime attacks and fragments their mobilizing structures with the support of its allies.

Damascus Spring

Repression

Before the onset of the Damascus Spring in 2000, Syria existed in a phase of repression that was characterized by Hafez al-Assad's tyrannical rule. He came to power in 1970 after staging a military coup to replace then president, Salah al-Jadid. Hafez al-Assad was once

described as "a kind of Santa Clause figure who watched over the nation and kept it stable and independent."[35] Hafez al-Assad achieved such stability by ruling with an iron fist. Human Rights Watch reported in 1998 that;

> The dual legacy of decades of one-party rule and state repression continued to cripple independent political life in Syria. With emergency law in effect since 1963, peaceful political expression and association criminalized, and all independent institutions of civil society long ago dismantled, citizens were unable to exercise basic civil and political rights guaranteed under international human rights law. The government-controlled print and broadcast media and the quadrennially elected parliament provided no opportunities for independent or opposition voices to be heard. Hundreds of members of unauthorized political opposition groups, imprisoned in the 1980s for nonviolent activities, languished in prison.[36]

Hafez al-Assad grounded his authority in a culture of fear among citizens. The scholar, Lisa Wedeen, termed this environment "as if" culture in her 1998 article on Syria. Wedeen describes "as if" culture as an external obedience whereby people follow a leader because "the authority deserves to be obeyed in so far as it is good, wise, beneficent."[37] In Syria, people voiced their support for the president because if one did not do so then they were subject to punishment, often in the form of extreme violence. This threat was so high that citizens practiced the principle of social auto-totality, "meaning that people enforce each other's obedience, without believing in what they do."[38] This enforcement was a combination of habit and a desire to maintain personal safety. Wedeen provides the example that, "taxi drivers [were] avid users of cult paraphernalia, a practice that is understood by officials and dissidents alike as an effort to dissuade traffic police from giving drivers tickets."[39] The taxi drivers did not really want to

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[35] David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 78.
[36] Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 1998-Syria* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 1998), https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a8b020.html.
[37] Lisa Wedeen, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 3 (1998): 510, https://www.jstor.org/stable/179273.
[38] Ibid, 512.
[39] Ibid.

display the images but they did so to avoid police harassment, and in turn, their images forced others to participate in Assad's cult of personality.

As a result of this culture, the Assad regime seemed untouchable until the 1990s, when the aging president had to face the reality of succession. Hafez al-Assad had five children, but he focused on training his eldest son, Basil, until he was killed in a car accident in 1994.[40] Hafez was forced to quickly begin training his second son, Bashar. Bashar al-Assad was very different from his brother as he had remained outside of politics, studying to become an optometrist.[41] Hafez al-Assad died on June 10, 2000, and in turn, Bashar al-Assad was elected as president after a national referendum and an amendment that changed the law regarding the minimum age of the president.[42]

Social Change

The death of Hafez al-Assad ushered in a phase of social change because of Bashar-al Assad's weak political reputation and his apparent desire to adopt democratic principles. Bashar was different from his father because he was young, well-educated, and more closely aligned with Western culture. However, he was also known to be "awkward and lacked the common touch necessary to win the loyalty of the population."[43] Therefore, he turned to the tactic of "commissioned criticism" in order to generate more domestic support. According to long-time Syria expert, miriam cooke, "at its most basic level commissioned criticism is an official and paradoxical project to create a democratic façade."[44] This political tool was first employed under Hafez al-Assad in order to prevent the build-up of popular grievance by allowing selected critical

[40] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 1-3.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, 81.
[43] Aryn Baker and Jay Newton-Small, "The Cult of Bashar Assad," *Time*, September 16, 2013, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,2151161,00.html.
[44] miriam cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), EPUB, 72.

opinions to be published and shared. For example, the Ministry of Culture would publish some culturally sensitive books to make citizens feel like they had the ability to choose their own beliefs, but in reality, the regime carefully chose which radical discussions were in its best interest.[45] Bashar al-Assad implemented "commissioned criticism" by issuing "general amnesties to political prisoners of all persuasions, the licensing of private newspapers, a shake-up of the state-controlled media apparatus, the provision of political forums and salons in which open criticism and dissent was tolerated, and a discarding of the personality cult that surrounded the previous regime."[46] He allowed for social discourse and even some criticism of the regime so that the Syrian people would be loyal to him, in light of his limited political background. However, it will be explained later in this section that the dialogue was heavily regulated by the Assad regime to prevent it from becoming too dangerous.

This "commissioned criticism" was furthered by Bashar al-Assad's own statements concerning the liberalization of the Syrian government. In his 2000 inaugural address, he shared his thoughts on democracy, and how he wanted to find a type of democracy that was unique to Syria and not just a mirror image of the West. [47] This massive change in the ideals of the Syrian government was met with strong international praise. Assad was heralded in newspapers like the *New York Times,* which ran stories with headlines such as, "TRANSITION IN SYRIA; Syrians See in the Heir Possibility of Progress." Even Madeline Albright spoke about how Bashar al-Assad appeared different from his father in terms of being more open to negotiations concerning Israel.[48]

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[45] miriam cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 74.
[46] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus,* 83.
[47] Syrian Arab News Agency, "President Bashar al-Assad: inaugural address," *Al-bab.com*, trans. the Syrian Arab News Agency, 2000, https://al-bab.com/documents-section/president-bashar-al-assad-inaugural-address.
[48] Jane Perlez, "Albright Finds Syria's New Leader Willing to Pursue Talks," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/14/world/albright-finds-syria-s-new-leader-willing-to-pursue-talks.html.

Mobilizing Structures and Repertoires of Contention

With the new environment of change in place in Syria, a group of local activists began to establish formal mobilizing structures. The resistance of the Damascus Spring began when a group of Syrian intellectuals, including lawyers, engineers, writers and former members of Parliament, organized salons or "muntadayat" where they could openly discuss political issues within civil society. According to scholars at the Carnegie Middle East Center, the most famous groups of this period were Riad Seif's National Dialogue Forum and Suhair al-Atassi's Jamal al-Atassi Forum.[49] The social change initiated by the "commissioned criticism" plan of Bashar al-Assad facilitated these meetings. In addition to the muntadayat, some members of these discussion groups even formed formal civil society organizations, like the Friends of Civil Society in Syria.[50] The mission statement of this organization was, "to revive the institutions of civil society and achieve a balance between their role and that of the state in the context of a real partnership between them in the higher national interest."[51] The members of these salons, organizations, and other intellectuals produced two documents calling for government reform; the Statement of 99, demanding political pluralism, and the Statement of 1000, demanding the end of the 1963 Emergency Law.[52] The Emergency Law had been used for decades to justify arbitrary arrests, detention, and ban the opposition.[53]

In addition to these internal mobilizing structures, there were also efforts by Syrian exiles to assist their domestic counterparts. For example, the Statement of 99 was not only signed by members of the domestic opposition, but a number of exiled Syrian intellectuals and activists

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[49] Diwan, "The Damascus Spring," Syria in Crisis, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 1, 2012, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en.
[50] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 86.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Diwan, "The Damascus Spring."
[53] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria's Assad ends state of emergency," *Reuters*, April 20, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria/syrias-assad-ends-state-of-emergency-idUSTRE72N2MC20110421.

also endorsed it. It was then published in a newspaper in Lebanon, *al-Safir*.[54] The Statement of 1000 was also leaked to a Lebanese newspaper.[55] International mobilization was primarily limited to the efforts of these Syrian exiles, but some foreign organizations did produce investigative reports. For example, in 2001, Amnesty International published the report *Syria: Torture, Despair, and Dehumanization in Tadmur Military Prison*, which actually led to the closure of the prison in 2001.[56]

Despite the fact that these efforts were revolutionary given the preexisting conditions within Syria, the repertoires of contention utilized to mobilize these domestic and international structures were not effective in quickly garnering support. The domestic mobilizing structures primarily depended on the salons and official statements as their means for taking collective action. Unfortunately, these repertories of contention were limited to highly educated members of society and those with more time for leisure, deterring lower class citizens and members of religious and ethnic minorities. For example, among the 99 individuals who signed the Statement of 99, the most popular professions were poet, researcher, university professor, cinematographer, and lawyer.[57] Therefore, most citizens still demonstrated loyalty to Assad. This loyalty was clearly expressed in an interview with a voter in the 2000 national referendum who said that, "we are committed to continuing the legacy of President Assad and his ideology. We are looking forward to the hopes and promises from Bashar who will continue where his father left off."[58]

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[54] *Syria: Human Rights Developments,* New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001, accessed March 21, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k1/mideast/syria.html.
[55] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 87.
[56] The New Arab, "The darker side of Syria's Palmyra," *The New Arab*, May 21, 2015, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/5/21/the-darker-side-of-syrias-palmyra.
[57] Al-Hayat, "Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals," trans. Suha Mawlawi Kayal, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 2, no. 9 (2000), https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0010_sdoc0927.htm.
[58] Associated Press, "SYRIA: BASHAR ASSAD: VOTE (2)," Associated Press Television Network, July 7, 2000, video, 3:45, http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/4fe91d82bd2ceb634f502dccb451740d.

Additionally, this loyalty to Assad, while it may not have been completely genuine, was a result of the high cost of joining the movement. Not only was the campaign exclusive, but according to Samir Abboud, a professor at Villanova University, the lack of party formation kept the cost of participating in the forums high, disincentivizing people from joining the opposition.[59] The general amnesties and protections from the government were still not enough for most Syrian to feel comfortable outwardly rejecting the regime. The movement wanted to radically reform the government, but given the "as if" culture within the country, the campaign needed to utilize repertoires of contention that broke the wall of fear. Better repertoires of contention could have included political parties or large demonstrations that would have publicly portrayed citizens' shared frustrations. However, in such a highly repressive society, these actions would have taken time to develop, something not available to the opposition which quickly faced regime backlash.

Outcome

The Assad regime began its backlash once it felt the onset of the threat spiral in January 2001 with the publication of the Statement of 1000. This declaration condemned one-party rule in Syria, and it suggested a number of reforms to both the governing structure and the expression of individual freedoms.[60] This declaration was very ambitious for the opposition, presenting it with a great opportunity, but it also threatened the authority of the regime. One participant in the Damascus Spring wrote about the rapid reversal of Assad's liberal policies in response to the threat posed by civil society;

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[59] Samer N. Abboud, *Syria: Second Edition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 57.
[60] Seth Wikas, *Policy Focus #69: Battling the Lion of Damascus: Syria's Domestic Opposition and the Asad Regime* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus69.pdf, 5

> The regime tolerated us for a while, but then got worried. More and more university students were attending, and the regime thought we were poisoning the minds of the young generation. So, they banned us. All of a sudden, they called us spies and threw us in prison. Security cars started following my wife and me, and then forces broke into my house at 5:30 in the morning and took me away.[61]

The state initiated a crackdown that included the arrest of ten leaders of the Damascus Spring in August 2001. According to Human Rights Watch, "two members of parliament, Ma'mun al-Homsi and Riad Seif … were sentenced by the Damascus Criminal Court to five years in jail. The other eight activists, Riad al-Turk, `Aref Dalilah, Walid al-Bunni, Kamal al-Labwani, Habib Salih, Hasan Sa`dun, Habib `Isa, and Fawwaz Tello, were referred to the Supreme State Security Court which issued prison sentences between two to 10 years."[62] Even though only a handful of activists were arrested, the campaign was effectively shut down as a result of the arrest of the opposition's main leader, Riad Seif. Many considered Seif to be the true leader of the movement because of his reputation, popularity, and ability to unify the opposition.[63] Campaigns like the Damascus Spring were attempting to bring together a group of individuals who had never before associated. It required a well-known and charismatic leader to mobilize the participants. Once Seif was arrested, the movement began to fragment without his leadership.

Regardless of the weakness of the movement's mobilizing structures and repertories of contention, the Damascus Spring would not have failed so quickly if it was not for this backlash. The opportunity spiral had commenced with the Statement of 1000, and eventually the leadership of the movement could have adapted its focus and the methods of the campaign. However, this

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[61] Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 33.
[62] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria II. Recommendations* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 2007), https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/syria1007/2.htm.
[63] Seth Wikas, *Policy Focus #69: Battling the Lion of Damascus*, 14.

was not possible because the backlash was implemented quickly and intensely in the absence of protection from external actors. A successful uprising requires that domestic and international mobilizing structures act simultaneously. This is because domestic actors need the protection of international countries in order to prevent repression that would fragment the movement before it has had the time to organize and develop a sustainable framework. While there was some international assistance during the Damascus Spring, it came from organizations and people who did not have the ability to stop the regime's arrests. The countries that needed to sound the alarm turned a blind eye to Assad's crackdown because of their own national interests in the Middle East.

Foreign Alliances

At the time of the Damascus Spring, Syria's main allies included Western countries and other Arab states. This relationship began in 1991 after Syria sided with the United States, Egypt and Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War against Iraq.[64] The first few years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency came with major events in the Middle East, and many of Syria's allies began looking to it for assistance. In September 2000, the Second Intifada broke out in violation of the 1993 Peace Accord between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.[65] This led to extreme violence in the form of "suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and sniper fire."[66] By 2005, approximately 1000 Israelis and 3200 Palestinians had been killed.[67] Syria had the ability to facilitate an end to this violence because, it was "one of the few countries in the Arab world that

[64] Ray Moseley, "Syria's Support of the U.S. in Gulf War Paying Dividends," *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1991, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-03-12-9101220963-story.html.
[65] Al Jazeera, "The second Intifada," *Al Jazeera*, December 4, 2003, https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2003/12/20084101554875168.html. And Office of the Historian, "The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," *United States Department of State*, last updated in 2016, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo.
[66] Zack Beauchamp, "What were the intifadas," *Vox*, May 14, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/11/20/18080066/israel-palestine-intifadas-first-second.
[67] Ibid.

[could] play—or at least try to play both-- sides of the fence."[68] In 2000, Syria had not signed a peace treaty with Israel itself, but its efforts in the 1991 Madrid Conference and the Gulf War, demonstrated that Syria could be "an important conduit to those Arab countries who [had] yet to sign a peace agreement with Israel.[69] Outside of Syria's involvement in the Second Intifada, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Western nations, particularly the United States, also needed Syria's help in collecting intelligence on terrorist activities. Accordingly, "Damascus provided some very helpful, if not crucial information to U.S. officials regarding al-Qaida members and groups in order to thwart possible further attacks against American interests in the Middle East."[70]

Since Syria was critical to the interests of those involved in the War on Terror and the Second Intifada, these countries decided to ignore the abuses occurring within the Assad regime that were stopping the opportunity spiral of the opposition. Countries like the United States were quickly made aware of the arrests and closures as demonstrated in the contents of the 2001 U.S. State Department Country Report on Syria.[71] Nevertheless, they did not draw international attention to the issue until it was too late to preserve the movement. Newspapers like *The New York Times, The Guardian, the Times, The Los Angeles Times, and The Chicago Tribune* all published articles discussing the crackdown on the Damascus Spring because they knew it was a major setback for the movement. Unfortunately, though, many of these articles were published in 2002, after the Damascus Spring came to a close. Syria's allies focused the public's attention on their own national interests because of their need for domestic support at home and a friendly relationship with Syria and the Assad regime. These countries prevented the opportunity spiral

[68] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus,* 158.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid, 161-162.
[71] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2001 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria," (United States, 2002), https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/nea/8298.htm.

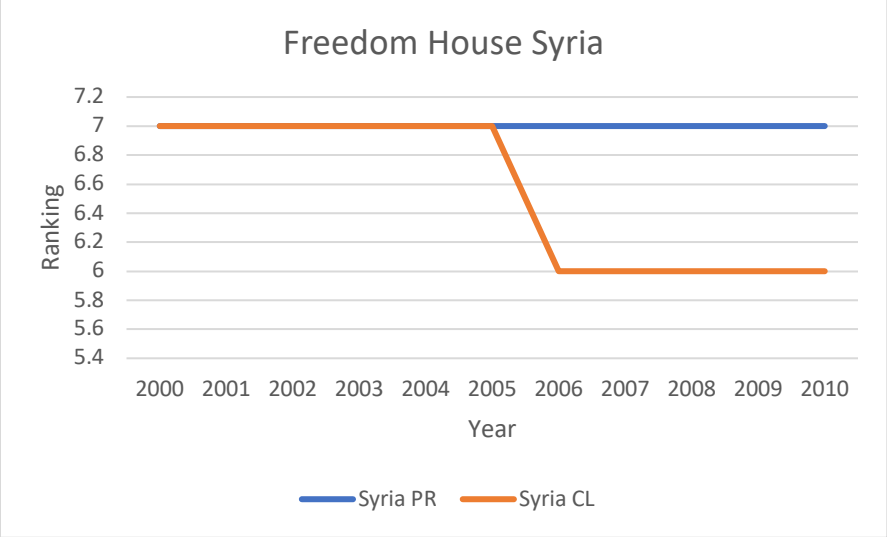
from extending beyond the achievements of the Statement of 1000. Therefore, even though Syria's allies were not directly arresting people, their actions facilitated Assad's backlash causing the reversal in civil society reform. The next section on the Arab Spring will begin with the continued repression of the Assad regime following the Damascus Spring.

Arab Spring

Repression

Human Rights Watch called the years following the Damascus Spring a "wasted decade,"[72] because the promises that Bashar-al Assad made early in his presidency never came true. Instead, the rights of citizens continued to be limited as depicted in the following data from Freedom House.

Figure 7: Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Syria 2000-2010



Source: Freedom House[73]

[72] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al Asad's First Ten Years in Power* (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 2010), https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-first-ten-years-power.
[73] Freedom House, "Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973-2020," published by Freedom House, 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world.

The blue line represents political rights and the orange line represents civil liberties. Syria maintained a ranking of 6 or 7 for the entire decade preceding the Arab Spring. A ranking of 7 equals no freedom and 1 equals the most freedom. Assad restricted the freedom of Syrians through measures like controlling internet access, banning gatherings of more than five people from discussing political and economic topics, and denying registration of human rights groups.[74] This repression was amplified by the increasing poverty in Syria as a result of a combination of natural disaster and poor economic policy.

According to The Center for Climate and Security, "from 2006-2011, up to 60% of Syria's land experienced, in the terms of one expert, 'the worst long-term drought and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began in the Fertile Crescent many millennia ago'."[75] In response to this drought, 800,000 Syrians experienced total crop failure and moved to the cities.[76] Yet, what made this loss even worse was the continued marginalization of Syria's poor as a result of privatization and new neoliberal economic policies brought about by the Assad regime. These policies led to an average increase in GDP of 4.3% per year from 2000-2010, but this growth left most working-class Syrians behind. The official unemployment rate in 2010 was 8.6%, but as a result of the drought, the actual number was closer to 25%. Additionally, there was a lack of public services and assistance given to the poor at the same time that the rich saw more opportunities.[77] These economic conditions generated mass

[74] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2008-Syria," *Refworld*, July 2, 2008, https://www.refworld.org/docid/487ca26178.html.
[75] Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change, Drought and Social Unrest," *The Center for Climate and Security*, February 29, 2012, https://climateandsecurity.org/2012/02/29/syria-climate-change-drought-and-social-unrest/.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Joseph Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 42.

disillusionment with the government, motivating Syrians to mobilize after the major social change that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in 2011.

Social Change

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, was harassed by local police for not having a proper permit to sell fruit.[78] His property was confiscated and when the government failed to help him rectify the issue, he set himself on fire in protest. Thousands of Tunisians took up his cause and began protesting in the streets. By January 2011, the president of Tunisia, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, was forced into exile after 23 years in office.[79] The success of the Tunisian opposition motivated citizens in other Arab countries to protest against their own governments. The wall of fear in many Arab countries was broken because the demonstrations showed that many people did not believe in the state's propaganda, and that citizens had the ability to change their country for the better. In other words;

> What changed with the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia was the recognition that even the worst tyrants could be toppled. It shattered the wall of fear. That is why hundreds of thousands of Egyptians came into the streets on Jan. 25. It is why protests broke out in Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan. It's why Syrians and Libyans took unfathomable personal risks to rise up against seemingly untouchable despots despite the near certainty of arrest, torture, murder, and reprisals against their families.[80]

The regional social change caused by these early demonstrations in countries like Tunisia and Egypt eventually spread to Syria. This domino-effect is similar to what occurred in Eastern

[78] Amor Boubakri, "Interpreting the Tunisian Revolution," in *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, edited by Larbi Sadiki (New York: Routledge, 2015), 65
[79] British Broadcasting Corporation, "Arab uprising: Country by country- Tunisia," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, last modified December 16, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482315.
[80] Mark Lynch, "The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring," *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/28/the-big-think-behind-the-arab-spring/.

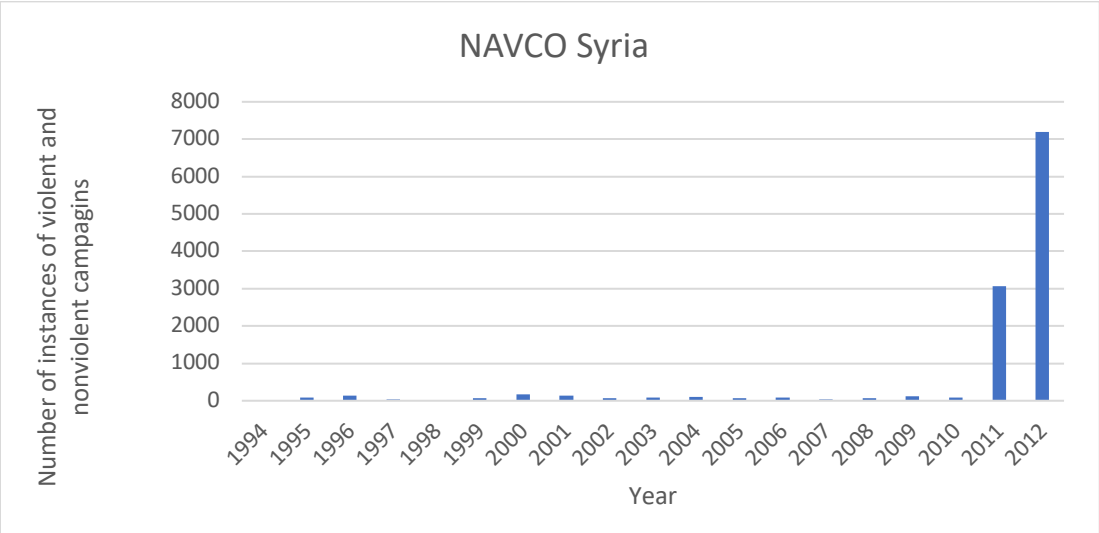
Europe in 1989, and using the observations of that movement by the scholar, Timur Kuran, it is possible to explain how regional social change led to the mobilizing structures in Syria. Kuran explains that all citizens have a threshold that prevents them from joining the public opposition. For some people this threshold is very low because of a history of abuse by the government, but for other people it is very high because they benefit from the regime's patronage or protection. Each person's threshold correlates to a certain level of public opposition that would cause them to join it. What occurred during the Arab Spring was a revolutionary bandwagon. It begins when one person has an exceptionally bad experience with the government, like Bouazizi. His experience forced his threshold so low that he joined the small public opposition by setting himself on fire. When he committed that act, the public opposition increased in size so that it equaled the threshold of another person, causing them to join the public opposition as well. This pattern repeated itself until thousands of people had taken to the streets in Tunisia. Everyone had joined the public opposition expect for those people who would always be loyal to the regime.[81]

The revolutionary bandwagon then spread outside of Tunisia, because the actions of Bouazizi and the other protestors increased the level of public opposition for each subsequent country. In Syria, the revolutionary bandwagon began in March 2011 in the city of Daraa after a group of boys were arrested and tortured for creating anti-regime graffiti. Their brutal treatment prompted 600 protestors to confront the local governor.[82] Figure 8 illustrates just how quickly the revolutionary bandwagon spread throughout the country. Prior to 2011 there were few

[81] Timor Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 19-20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010422.
[82] Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and what the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 82-83.

instances of violent or nonviolent campaigns in Syria. However, in 2011, there were over 3000 instances, and by 2012 this number had more than doubled as the public opposition grew.

Figure 8: Violent and Nonviolent campaigns in Syria



Source: NAVCO Data Project[83]

Mobilizing Structures and Repertoires of Contention

Given the large number of participants in the Arab Spring demonstrations, the mobilizing structures and repertories of contention used by the Syrian opposition must have been significantly more effective than those implemented during the Damascus Spring. In the beginning of the movement, a transnational network was formed that utilized social media in order to better coordinate the movement and make it accessible to more Syrians. One of the most widely used social media platforms was Facebook, where the page *Syrian Revolution 2011* had

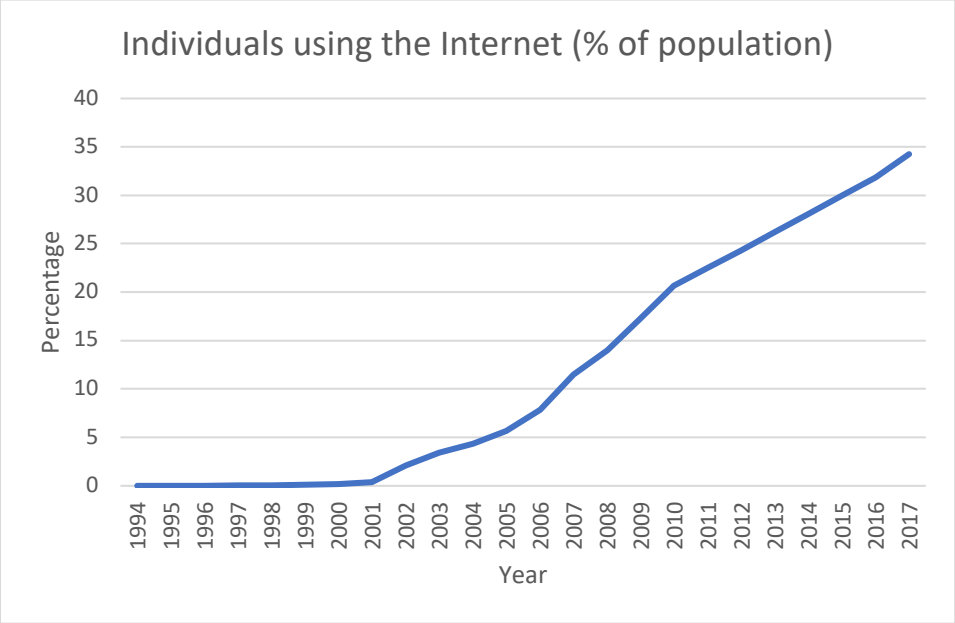
[83] Erica Chenoweth, Orion A. Lewis and Jonathan Pinckney, "Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes Dataset, v. 3.0," produced by the University of Denver, 2017, https://www.du.edu/korbel/sie/research/chenow_navco_data.html.

over 300,000 followers.[84] At first, the main participants in these networks lived outside of Syria, including exiled intellectuals, first-generation immigrants of Syrian dissent, and traditional opposition groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.[85] The networks facilitated the same kinds of discussions that had occurred during the Damascus Spring, but this time they helped to mobilize and direct the movement to a much greater degree.[86] According to Adam Almqvist, a PhD researcher at the University of Chicago, "in the early stages of the uprising, the statements [*Syrian Revolution 2011*] produced several times a day effectively translated into semi-official policy for the revolution."[87] Almqvist quotes "Fiddaalidin Al-Sayed Issa, a Sweden-based activist and leader of *Syrian Revolution 2011*, [who] said "we guide young people down there. When we call for a Friday demonstration, people take to the streets – everyone follows. We determine the dates of the demonstrations with the help of people on the ground'."[88]

This social media-based transnational network was an effective repertoire of contention because by the onset of the Arab Spring, more than 20% of Syrian society was using the internet according to Figure 9. This meant that many Syrians had the ability to access the mobilizing structure, which was not the case during the Damascus Spring.

[84] Adam Almqvist, "The Syrian Uprising and the Transnational Public Sphere: Transforming the Conflict in Syria," in *The Syrian Uprising: Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife: University of St. Andrews for Syrian Studies, 2013), 57.
[85] Adam Almqvist, "The Syrian Uprising and the Transnational Public Sphere," 53-54.
[86] Ibid, 58.
[87] Ibid, 57.
[88] Ibid, 55.

Figure 9: Internet Use in Syria



Source: The World Bank Development Indicators[89]

Another effective repertoire of contention used by the opposition, outside of social media, included the large public demonstrations themselves. A single person would just stand and shout "God is great" in the street and then hundreds of people would join the public protest.[90] People became obsessed with the experience of protesting, and one man even said that his first demonstration was better than his wedding day.[91] Participants described the protests as very liberating, and because the demonstrations only required visibility, people could demonstrate in a variety of ways like simply wearing the same color.[92] This repertoire is effective for a population

[89] The World Bank, "Individuals using the Internet (% of population)," produced by The World Bank Group, 2019, https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators.
[90] Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*, 89.
[91] Ibid, 83.
[92] Ibid, 78.

that has long been repressed, because as explained in the section on the Damascus Spring, it lowers the cost of joining the public opposition.

Syrian cities were ideal for these protests as they were densely populated, especially after the migration that followed the 2008 drought. For example, 200,000 people moved to Aleppo alone.[93] Additionally, since a large number of protestors were Muslim, they were able to use local mosques as gathering points.[94] In fact, most demonstrations occurred on Fridays after prayer because the mosques provided a meeting place, and the government did not monitor what occurred inside of these spaces.[95]Therefore, new social groups that had been absent during the Damascus Spring were now joining the opposition.

Most of the protestors came from the populations that endured the worst effects of Assad's neoliberal and discriminatory policies. Assad gave political positions, tax breaks, and economic partnerships to Alawite Syrians, the minority group to which he belonged, discriminating against Sunni Muslims, who made up 59.1% of the population.[96] According to Joseph Daher, the mobilization of Sunni Muslims is clearly depicted in "the Damascus suburbs and towns surrounding the capital, where protest was prevalent since the beginning of the uprising."[97] In addition to Sunni protestors, youth readily joined the movement, because "on the one hand, the internationalized elites close to the regime had passports, studied abroad, and were free to purchase imported goods. By contrast, the children of the middle classes, often with diplomas but without economic capital, and the working classes living in informal settlements,

[93] Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change."
[94] Reza Aslan and Steve Inskeep, "Why Are 'Arab Spring' Protests Held on Friday?" produced by NPR, *Morning Edition,* July 22, 2011, podcast, MP3 audio, 4:00, https://www.npr.org/2011/07/22/138599515/why-are-arab-spring-protests-held-on-friday.
[95] Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled*," 72.
[96] Michael Izady, "Syria: Ethnic Composotion in 2010," in *Islamic World and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia University, 2006-present), https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Detailed_lg.png.
[97] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 42.

saw their standard of living fall."[98] More people were obtaining higher education,[99] however, the number of job opportunities was shrinking for the youth who were not the direct beneficiaries of the regime's nepotism. Disillusionment with the Assad regime also motivated women to join the movement in order to protest against their exclusion from the state's wealth, and simultaneously reject their patriarchal society.[100]

In terms of mobilizing structures, the social media-based transnational network and the protests primarily relied on everyday social networks. However, the domestic mobilizing structure also established more formal organizations with the goal of improving coordination and implementing a nuanced political agenda. Soon after the first protests in March 2011, the activists began to establish Local Coordination Committees, otherwise known as LCCs. Initially, the LCCs acted as the facilitators of the protests by doing things like setting up sound systems and fundraising.[101] However, as certain cities began to fall to the opposition, the LCCs formed Local Councils to take on the new role of governing the area that was no longer under the control of the regime.[102] Therefore, the LCCs established a unified vision of reform in these territories while carrying out the three main functions of media, relief, and governance.[103]

In June 2011, some of these LCCs developed even further to create the Syrian Revolution Coordination Union to unify their work regionally. This group gradually lost power as a result of

[98] Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, "Genesis of a Revolution," in *The Civil War in Syria* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), EPUB, 51-52.
[99] According to Joseph Daher, "the number of students in higher education increased massively since the 1970s, enrollment figures for Syrian tertiary education grew from around 7 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 2010" (Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 43).
[100] Tamara Al-Om, "Syria's 'Arab spring': Women and the Struggle to Live in Truth," in *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, edited by Larbi Sadiki (New York: Routledge, 2015), 277.
[101] Abboud, *Syria*, 74.
[102] Ibid, 75.
[103] Ibid, 77.

internal division.[104] In August, the Syrian Revolution General Commission was established, and it represented "the Syrian Revolution [Facebook] Page, the Shaam News Network, and the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union."[105] However, it also fell to internal division. It was not until October that the first moderately successful regional organization was established. The Syrian National Council consisted of LCCs and groups outside of the country including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Declaration, the National Bloc, the Kurdish Bloc, the Assyrian Bloc, and independents.[106] This council created a charter to distribute power between the different organizations in order to replace the authority of the regime in rebel-held territory.[107] The association was quickly accused of being dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, and after losing the support of the LCCs, it was forced to join the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Initially this group had the support of the LCCs and the Free Syrian Army, but the Coalition eventually also lost the support of these domestic actors.[108]

The numerous failures of these formal organizations were the direct result of the state's backlash. Security forces fired live bullets into crowds and used teargas on protestors. In just the second month of the protests, 88 people were killed on a single day.[109] Similar to the Damascus Spring, this repression removed key leaders and organizers that had coordinated the movement,[110] leaving the formal organizations without the ability to unify the various

[104] Obaida Fares, "The Arab Spring Comes to Syria: Internal Mobilization for Democratic Change, Militarization and Internalization," in *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, edited by Larbi Sadiki (New York: Routledge, 2015), 155.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Abboud, *Syria,* 80.
[107] Ibid, 81.
[108] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 56.
[109] Katherine Marsh and Simon Tisdall, "Syrian troops shoot dead protesters in day of turmoil," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/syria-protests-forces-shoot.
[110] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 73.

components of the opposition. Despite the extreme violence, there was delayed assistance from the international community. While the transnational network was able to establish an effective repertoire of contention in the form of social media, foreign countries delayed their collective action. These nations were not Syria's key allies at the time but they acted in a similar manner by prioritizing their personal desire to keep Syria as the source of stability in the Middle East. The United States implemented a wait-and-see strategy regarding the Syrian Arab Spring.[111] They went even as far as claiming that Bashar al-Assad was a good leader:

> On March 28 [2011], U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Bashar al-Assad as different from his late father and predecessor, Hafez, adding that "many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."[112]

Consequently, it was not until April 2011 that the U.S. imposed its first round of sanctions against those responsible for human rights abuses in Syria. However, the U.S. had cut many of its economic ties with Assad, so this repertoire of contention was not effective in threatening the regime. The U.S. eventually asked Assad to step down in August,[113] but it wanted to maintain the Syrian security forces and only offer the opposition nonlethal and humanitarian support.[114] The U.S. did little to assist the protestors early in the movement out of fear of destabilizing another country like Iraq or Libya.

The U.S. was not alone in this hesitancy followed by ineffective support. In the beginning of the uprisings, the Gulf countries seemed to be coming to the rescue of the Syrian protestors. Key public figures from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait all supported the Sunni Islamist movements, as they had done in the other Arab Spring movements like Egypt.[115] However, the

[111] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 209.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 210.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid, 111.

most influential organization, the Arab League, was slow to react; it was not until November 2011 that Syria was formally suspended from the organization.[116] This delay in support left the opposition without protection from foreign countries, and the escalating violence prompted the opposition to militarize, permanently weakening the movement.[117]

The first armed rebellion by the opposition occurred in June 2011 at the Turkish border, and by July the Free Syrian Army had been established.[118] Rebel militias lacked unity and centralization because of "little ideological cohesion,"[119] and some of the militias worked in direct opposition to civil society.[120] Additionally, non-Sunni Muslim populations, including Christians, Druze, and Ismailis, stood with Assad because they feared that if it were not for his secular regime, then they would be persecuted by a Sunni-dominated government. The extreme violence used by the predominantly Sunni-rebel militias,[121] and their inability to govern rebel-held territory effectively, prompted these groups to support the Assad regime as the lesser of two evils.[122] In general, the onset of the civil war and militarization of the opposition considerably weakened the aspirations of the political movement.[123]

Foreign Alliances

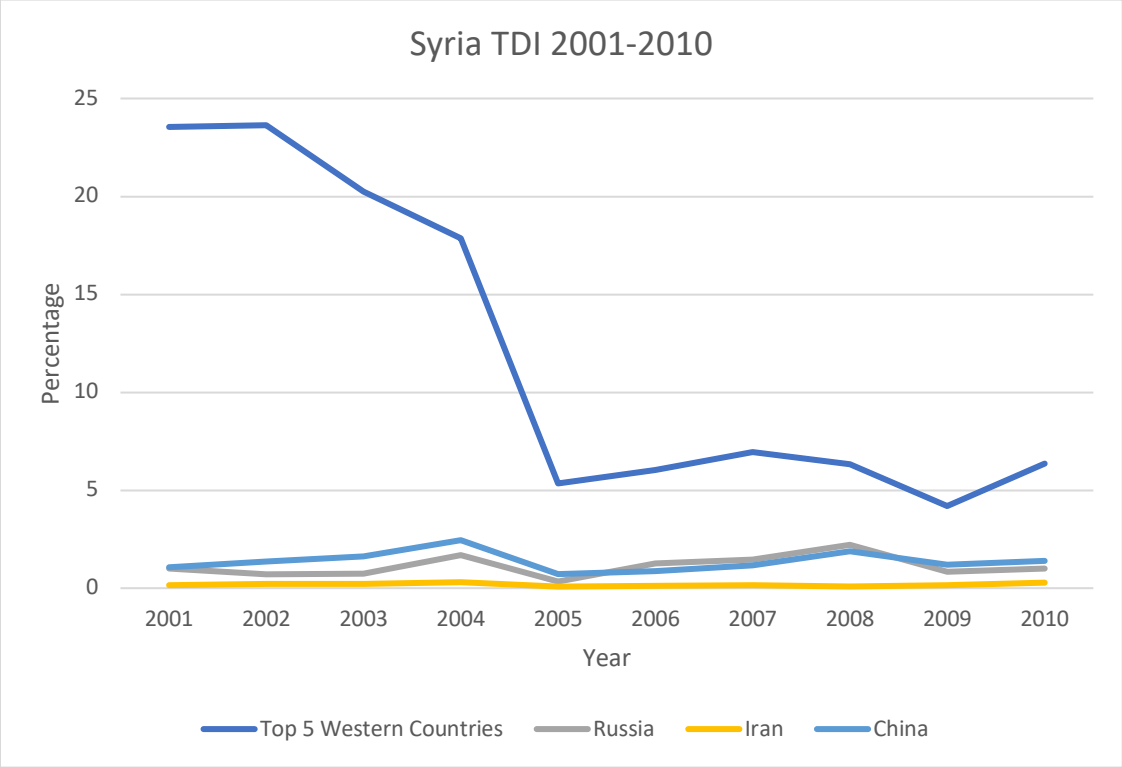
While the opposition was able to gain some opportunities, such as the cessation of the 1963 Emergency Law,[124] the concessions were limited because Syria's allies facilitated the rapid

[116] Neil MacFarquhar, "Arab League Votes to Suspend Syria Over Crackdown," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/world/middleeast/arab-league-votes-to-suspend-syria-over-its-crackdown-on-protesters.html.
[117] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 65.
[118] Ibid, 60.
[119] Ibid, 61.
[120] Abboud, *Syria*, 79 and Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 64.
[121] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 61.
[122] Abboud, *Syria*, 88.
[123] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 65.
[124] Marsh and Tisdall, "Syrian troops shoot dead protesters in day of turmoil."

and intense backlash of the Assad regime. In addition to the hesitancy of some nations like the U.S. and other Arab countries, there has been direct support of Assad's violence by countries like Russia and Iran. The dynamic of Syria's foreign alliances shifted away from the West in the decade between the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. The following chart depicts the change in terms of Syria's economic partnerships by measuring its trade dependency on the West and several of its allies for the years preceding the Arab Spring. The Trade Dependency Index, or TDI, is a measure used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the early 1990s. It is calculated by adding imports and exports together and then dividing that sum by the GDP + imports.[125] For the purpose of this research, the measure has been adapted to calculate Syria's dependence on any type of trade with the top five importing and exporting Western countries in any given year. The indices for Russia, China and Iran have also been added separately. China's involvement in Syria will be discussed in the next chapter on human rights campaigns to end the practice of state-sponsored torture.

[125] Paul V. Johnston, *Trade Dependency Index Tables for Total Merchandise, and Agricultural Trade, 1960-8* (Springfield: National Technical Information Service, 1992), 1-6.

Figure 10: Syria, Trade Dependency Index



Source: WITS[126] and the FRED[127]

In Figure 10, it is clear that Syria was heavily dependent on trade with the West in the beginning of the 21st century, mainly from Italy, Germany, the United States, and France.[128] However, in 2005, this dependency plummeted, reducing Syria's trade dependency on Western countries to a level similar to that of Russia, China and Iran. In fact, non-western countries ultimately took over in trade with Syria, so that by 2008 Syria's main exporter was Iraq and its

[126] World Integrated Trade Solution, "Syrian Arab Republic All Products Export to World in US$ Thousand 2001-2010," produced by the World Bank Group, 2019, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SYR/StartYear/2001/EndYear/2010/TradeFlow/Export/Indicator/XPRT-TRD-VL/Partner/WLD/Product/Total, and World Integrated Trade Solution, "Syrian Arab Republic All Products Export to World in US$ Thousand 2001-2010," produced by the World Bank Group, 2019, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SYR/StartYear/2001/EndYear/2010/TradeFlow/Import/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL/Partner/WLD/Product/Total.
[127] University of Groningen and University of California, Davis, "Real GDP at Constant National Prices for Syrian Arab Republic [RGDPNASYA666NRUG]," retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2019, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/RGDPNASYA666NRUG.
[128] World Integrated Trade Solution, "Syrian Arab Republic All Products Export" and World Integrated Trade Solution, "Syrian Arab Republic All Products Import."

main importer was China.[129] This transition was caused by the West distancing itself from Syria economically in response to their role in the War in Iraq. In May 2004, the United States imposed "economic sanctions on Syria over what it [called] its support for terrorism and failure to stop militants entering Iraq."[130] The West only furthered this retaliation as a consequence of Syria's alleged role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.[131]

This break down in economic relations between Syria and the West occurred at the same time that Syria was turning to new military allies as well. After 9/11, Bashar al-Assad condemned the attacks on the U.S. and stepped up to help in the War on Terror.[132] Despite Syria's assistance, in 2002, the U.S. declared Syria to be a "rogue state,"[133] prompting some individuals in the Syrian regime to believe that it was the next state to be toppled after Iraq.[134] Assad wanted to realign his country against the West, so Syria joined Hezbollah and Iran in forming the axis of resistance to the American-Israeli bloc.[135] In turn, these countries have supported the Assad regime financially and militarily during the Arab Spring in order to protect their own national interests in the region.

The involvement of these nations, namely Iran and Russia, is otherwise referred to as proxy warfare. According to Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at *Foreign Policy*, proxy warfare "occurs when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing a party

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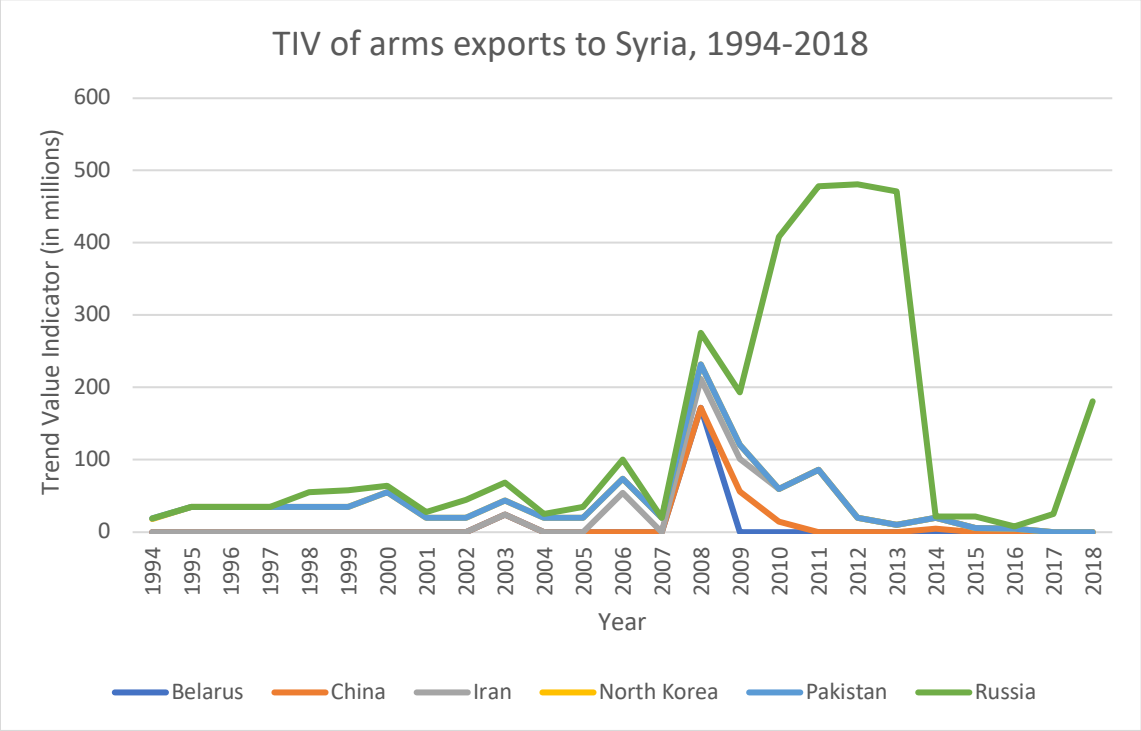
[129] Alexendar Simoes, "Where does Syria import from? (2008)" (Visualization), *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/syr/show/all/2008/ and Alexendar Simoes, "Where does Syria export from? (2008)" (Visualization), *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/syr/show/all/2008/.
[130] British Broadcasting Corporation, "Syria profile-timeline," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, last updated January 24, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995.
[131] Lesch, *Syria*, 148.
[132] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus,* 102.
[133] British Broadcasting Corporation, "US Expands the 'Axis of Evil'," Americas, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, May 6, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/1971852.stm.
[134] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus,* 115.
[135] Lesch, *Syria*, 150.

to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself."[136] Some countries use proxies in order to limit the cost of the war by using foreign forces who are often better suited for the environment where the war is being fought.[137] However, countries like Russia and Iran fight proxy wars in order to maintain their dominance in the Middle East. Iran and Russia have both been directly supplying weapons to the Assad regime in order to assist in its backlash against the opposition. The following graph shows how Russia has dramatically increased its weapons trade with Syria since the onset of the Arab Spring. The market has also been dominated by some of Syria's other key allies like China and Iran.

Figure 11: Foreign Arms Exports to Syria



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database[138]

[136] Daniel Byman, "Order from Chaos: Why engage in proxy war? A state's perspective," *Brookings*, May 21, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019, https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers.

This huge influx in exported weapons has resulted in a more violent and destructive conflict,[139] which is one of the many risks of proxy warfare. According to Byman,

> support for a proxy often leads other states to back their own favored horse, worsening the overall conflict…[and] once the spigot of cash and weapons to a proxy opens up, it is hard to close…[because] to gain or solidify domestic support for aid, the sponsoring power often talks up the proxy's cause and the heroic nature of the fighters, making it harder to walk away from them. Programs and even entire bureaucracies develop, creating vested interests in continuing the fight.[140]

Therefore, Syria's allies will not withdraw their assistance until the Assad regime has won the war. They do not care about the crimes that it is committing because Syria plays a key geopolitical role in the Middle East. Russia's involvement in Syria is based on both a political and economic alliance. Russia owns a naval base located in Tartus, Syria, which serves as the key to Russia's presence in the Mediterranean.[141] Russia has also established a strong trade relationship with the Assad regime by using Syria as a new market for its investment in cereals and wheat.[142] The two countries even trade heavy construction equipment, oil, and gas.[143] Furthermore, Syria has been rewarding Russian companies with major contracts in the energy and mining sectors.[144] Outside of this economic alliance, Russia has also been supporting the Assad regime in order to prevent U.S. influence in the region. "Moscow considered the possible overthrow of the Syrian regime a major threat to its own regional interests, viewing such an outcome as weakening its influence in the region and bolstering the U.S. position and that of its allies."[145] The anti-American aspect of Russia's involvement in Syria was evident after reports

[139] Lynch, "The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring," 192.
[140] Daniel Byman, "Order from Chaos: Why engage in proxy war?"
[141] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 191.
[142] Ibid, 194.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid, 194-195.
[145] Ibid, 190.

came out in 2018 that, "dozens or even hundreds of Russian fighters were…killed in a failed attack on a U.S.-Kurdish base in the Deir Ezzor region in support of Assad."[146]

Iran has also become involved in Syria for security and economic reasons. Iran has traditionally used Syria to resupply their ally, Hezbollah, but Iran has now also been using Syria as a way to connect with the new Iraqi government. Iran has been improving its relationship with Iraq through projects such as a railway and pipeline that both run through Syria.[147] Additionally, since Syria has long been a pariah state, Iran has also engaged in profitable trade with Syrian companies and the government. For example, "trade between the two countries grew from approximately USD 300 million in 2010 to USD 1 billion in 2014."[148] Similar to Russia, Iran has also been carrying out a proxy war in Syria in order to prevent the country from falling under the control of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been competing for geopolitical influence in the Middle East ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Saudi Arabia fears that the revolutionary ideology that supported the regime change in Iran could be exported to Saudi Arabia.[149] According to Hassan Hassan, writing for *The National,*

> For the Gulf States,[150] the Syria conflict is thus a critical battle for control of a key pivot state in the region. Drawing Damascus away from the Iranian camp is seen as a way of cementing broader regional influence in the Levant, and reestablishing the more favorable balance of power that they lost following the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003.[151]

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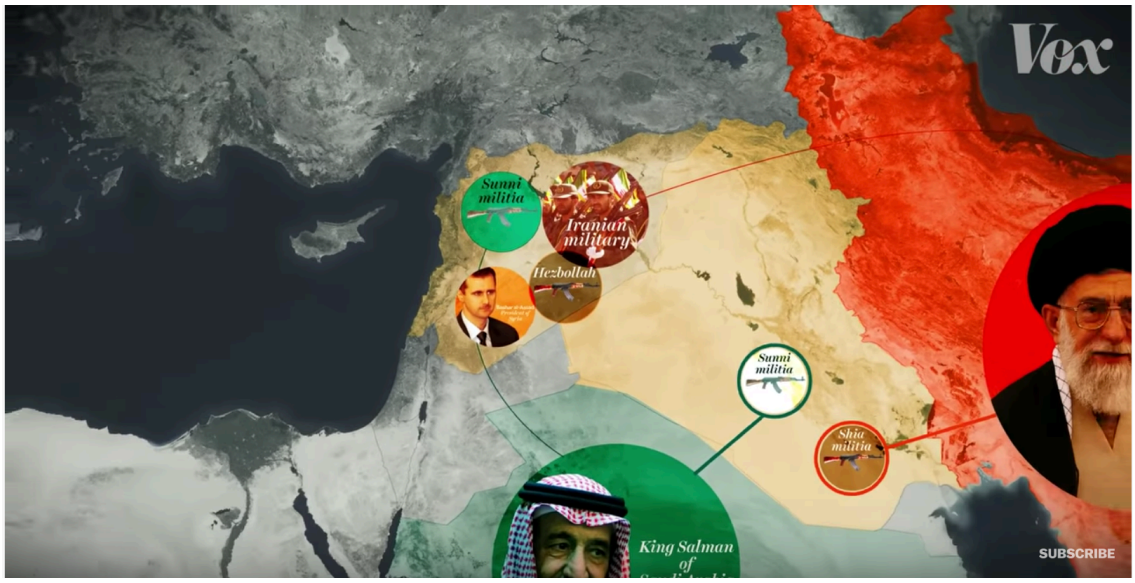
[146] Ian Bremmer, "These 5 Proxy Battles Are Making Syria's War Increasingly Complicated," *Time*, February 16, 2018, https://time.com/5162409/syria-civil-war-proxy-battles/.
[147] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 200.
[148] Ibid, 198.
[149] Vox, "The Middle East's cold war, explained," YouTube, July 17, 2017, video, 10:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veMFCFyOwFI.
[150] Qatar has also been assisting the opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic fundamentalist movements that have strong connections to Qatar. However, as a result of the Gulf blockade, a comparison between Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries will not be included in this paper as it is more relevant to Gulf politics than the Middle East as a whole (Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 219).
[151] Ibid, 218.

Figure 12 illustrates how the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has captured the Syrian Civil War. The large green circle represents the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the large red circle represents Iran, and the various lines represent economic and military funding. Saudi Arabia is funding the Sunni militias including the Free Syrian Army and Islamic fundamentalist movements,[152] while the Iranian military and Hezbollah are assisting the Assad regime. Furthermore, this Sunni vs. Shia component to the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran transformed a movement for democratization and political reform into sectarian conflict.

Figure 12: Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Syrian Civil War



Source: Vox[153]

With the help of these allies, the Assad regime has failed to experience a threat spiral that would force it to make meaningful concessions. The rapid growth of the opposition early in the uprising, and the trend of other Arab leaders falling to the pressure of these demonstrations,

[152] Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 219.
[153] Vox, "The Middle East's cold war, explained".

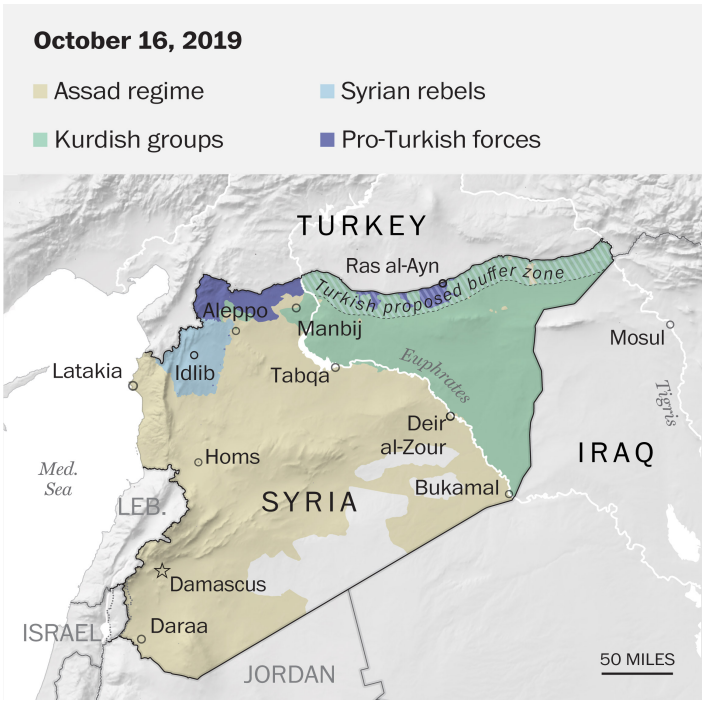
threatened Assad's existence. However, a threat spiral was not able to commence, because when Assad felt threatened, he was provided with the resources to crackdown on these protesters via attacks by internal security forces and even warfare. Assad's allies physically facilitated his backlash by exporting weapons to Syria and by even sending their own soldiers to fight in the ensuing civil war. Both Iranian soldiers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russian mercenaries have been directly involved in the conflict. This militarization led to the fragmentation of the opposition's mobilizing structures by shifting its focus from democratization to warfare, delegitimizing the movement and killing its key leaders and activists.[154]

Outcome

The conflict in Syria is still ongoing, and since the beginning of the Arab Spring, 560,000 Syrians have been killed.[155] The concessions made by the Assad regime have been limited to the lifting of the 1963 Emergency Law, the legalizing of appropriate peaceful demonstrations, and the abolishment of the state security courts.[156] These reforms do not illustrate policy changes, because immediately after they were enforced, more repressive measures were adopted. The state never went beyond these 2011 concessions, because of the fragmentation of the opposition via the support of Syria's allies. The opportunity spiral of the opposition was stymied, and the Assad regime has been able to reclaim most of the territory it had lost to the rebels. The following map shows that as of October 2019, the Syrian rebels only controlled Idlib province.

[154] Daher, *Syria after the Uprisings*, 73.
[155] Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, "Syria: 560,000 killed in seven yrs of war, SOHR."
[156] British Broadcasting Corporation, "Syria Protests: Bashar al-Assad lifts emergency law," Middle East, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, April 21, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13161329.

Figure 13: Current State of the Syrian Civil War



Source: *The Washington Post*[157]

Despite Assad's victories, the Syrian government has sustained serious damage as a result of the war. According to World Vision, currently "about 5.6 million Syrians are refugees, and another 6.2 million people are displaced within Syria. Nearly 12 million people in Syria need humanitarian assistance."[158] Much of Syria has also been physically destroyed, and the country ranked 4th on the 2019 Fragile States Index, which measures a country's ability to manage and prevent conflict.[159] While Russia and Iran have prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, Syria's survival is dependent on its ability to reintegrate itself into the global economy and international politics. Otherwise, Syria will not have the resources to rebuild. Some Arab

[157] Rick Noack and Aaron Steckelberg, "What Trump just triggered in Syria, visualized," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/17/what-trump-just-triggered-syria-visualized/.
[158]Kathryn Reid, "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help," *World Vision*, updated March 10, 2020, https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts.
[159]Fragile States Index, "Global Data," *The Fund for Peace*, 2019, https://fragilestatesindex.org/data/ and Fragile States Index, "Methodology," *The Fund for Peace*, https://fragilestatesindex.org/methodology/.

countries have accepted Bashar al-Assad as the leader of Syria, with the Arab League preparing to invite him back and the United Arab Emirates reopening their Syrian embassy.[160]

However, other countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States are still cautious about working with Assad.[161] These countries do not have enough power to remove Assad from office, but they could potentially force Assad to make some reforms in the future. Therefore, while the mobilizing structures of the Arab Spring are largely ineffective now, there are other actors, both domestic and international, that have the ability to pressure the state if the right repertories of contention are found. One potential repertoire is introduced in the next chapter, where the failures of the human rights campaigns to end torture during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring are specifically discussed in detail.

[160]i24News, "Syria to be readmitted to Arab League: report," *i24News*, December 26, 2018, https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/191806-181226-syria-to-be-readmitted-to-arab-league-report and Tom Perry, "UAE reopens Syria embassy in boost for Assad," *Reuters*, December 27, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates/uae-reopens-syria-embassy-a-boost-for-assad-idUSKCN1OQ0QV.

[161] Giorgio Cafiero, "Algeria's Push for Syria's Return to the Arab League," *InsideArabia,* March 25, 2020, https://insidearabia.com/algerias-push-for-syrias-return-to-the-arab-league/ and Ghaida Ghantous and Michael Georgy, " U.S. pressing Gulf states to keep Syria isolated: sources, *Reuters*, February 18, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-gulf/u-s-pressing-gulf-states-to-keep-syria-isolated-sources-idUSKCN1Q70VO.

Chapter 3: Why the Human Rights Campaigns to End Torture in Syria Failed

The previous chapter examined how Syria's allies affected the outcomes of the uprisings during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. This chapter will attempt to apply that same methodology to the human rights campaigns to end the practice of state-sponsored torture in Syria. Since the two campaigns have already been examined extensively on their own, this chapter will directly compare each element of the contentious "spiral model" during both periods. The analysis will show that the Damascus Spring implemented weak mobilizing structures and indirect repertoires of contention, because of the wall of fear that was established during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad. On the other hand, the Arab Spring saw the mobilization of organizations that implemented effective repertoires of contention in response to a dramatic change in the scale of torture used by the regime. Irrespective of the differences between these two campaigns, both movements failed as neither achieved a meaningful improvement in the Freedom from Torture Index. The factor that remained the same during both periods was the interference of Syria's allies, designating it as the causal factor of the failed outcomes. Syria's allies facilitated backlash against the opposition by ignoring the abuses of the regime in 2000 and by exporting weapons to Syria during the 2011 Civil War. Since the onset of the Arab Spring, these allied countries have also used their power in international political systems to render the traditional means used to condemn torture unavailable. Fortunately, though, a new mobilizing structure has developed that promises future reform because it utilizes a repertoire of contention that functions independently of Syria's allies.

Repression

The repression that proceeded both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring was characterized by severe restrictions to individuals' civil liberties and political rights. However, there was a major difference between the psychological effect of the repression proceeding the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring. In 2000, Syrians were terrified of the state's capacity to attack its own citizens as a result of the 1982 Hama massacre. The fear brought about by this incident was absent in the younger generation that participated in the Arab Spring. They did not remember the massacre, and so they were more willing to follow the trend of regional social change in 2011.

The Hama massacre had the capacity to paralyze the opposition and the public at large during the Damascus Spring because of the horrific extent of its violence. In 1982, tens of thousands of people were killed in response to an armed uprising of 200-500 armed Muslim Brotherhood fighters.[162] One participant in the Arab Spring wrote about the way in which his father was impacted by the massacre:

> My aunt was pregnant at the time. My parents took her to the hospital. They had to stop at the checkpoints on the way there and saw corpses lined along the road. My father carries that sight inside him until now. He still has that fear until this day. Whenever we watched anything on TV related to politics, he'd say, "Turn off the television!" He couldn't even bear to watch a political TV show—that's how afraid he was.[163]

This fear of a similar government response to opposition activity kept people from mobilizing against the regime in 2000 and 2001. However, when the Arab Spring swept through Syria, many people, especially of the younger generation, did not share this memory. Bashar al-Assad did not have the same legacy of violence as his father before the Arab Spring. The following

[162] Basma Atassi, "Breaking the silence over Hama atrocities," *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2012, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/20122232155715210.html.
[163] Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled*, 78.

table records the number of deaths due to torture between 2000 and 2007 from the U.S. State Department Country Reports. After 2007, the reports stopped calculating a total number of victims every year.

Figure 14: Instances of Death due to Torture in Syria 2000-2007

Year	Number of Deaths due to Torture
2000	0
2001	3
2002	0
2003	1
2004	8
2005	4
2006	1
2007	3

Source: Section A. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life in the U.S. State Department Country Reports 2000-2007[164]

It should be noted that there was no independent monitoring of Syrian prisons, so these numbers are most likely lower than in reality.[165] Nevertheless, the small number of torture-related deaths and the closure of both Tadmur and Mezze prison[166] during the Damascus Spring, meant that before the Arab Spring, there were less reasons to fear backlash from Bashar al-Assad.

[164] See bibliography for full list of citations.
[165] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*.
[166] Diwan, "The Damascus Spring."

Social Change

The fact that people were more scared of the regime during the Damascus Spring also explains the limited social change that occurred. An increase in the scale of torture is often the social change that leads to the mobilization of human rights campaigns to end the practice of state-sponsored torture. There was little change in the scale of torture in 2000 because the state was able to control the opposition through its policies of "commissioned criticism." The movement did not make truly revolutionary demands out of fear of government reprisal, and so the regime was able to silence the opposition through a few arrests and closures. However, during the Arab Spring the scale of torture dramatically increased because the threat posed by the opposition also increased. People were no longer afraid of the state, and so the Assad regime needed to use mass violence in order to force citizens into submission. This section will compare the changes in the scale of torture that occurred during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring.

Amnesty International has published two major reports concerning torture in Syrian prisons shortly after the Damascus Spring and during the Arab Spring; the first in 2001 on Tadmur prison, and the second in 2016 on Saydnaya prison. These reports include testimonies from survivors of the prisons. In the 2001 report, there are testimonies from prisoners who were interned both before and after the onset of the Damascus Spring. This first example is from a prisoner interned from 2000-2001, and it details how prisoners were tortured when they initially arrived at the prisons.

> After getting off the bus at the prison of Tadmur we were ordered to cover our heads with towels, or pull our shirts over our heads. We then marched through the prison gate with our heads covered and our hands tied behind our backs. During the first day we completed registration formalities. On the following day we were assembled for the official 'reception party.' When it was my turn, I was ordered to lie on my stomach…. They then tied my feet to an iron bar with a chain and raised my legs up. Four boards pressed on my back with their feet to make sure that I didn't move. I was then whipped probably over 200 times with a cable until I lost consciousness.[167]

The second example is from a prisoner interned from 1996-1999, and their account illustrates the torture that occurred on a daily basis.

> Punishments were numerous and varied in Tadmur and one did not need to commit a particular offence to be harshly penalized. If the guard at the ceiling saw a prisoner moving his hand or leg or make any movement while asleep, he would ask the prisoner on shift to "mark" that person (marking means singling out a prisoner for future punishment). Punishments were normally carried out after breakfast and usually ranged from 50 to 200 lashes, depending on the overall conditions in the prison.[168]

The two quotes detail different methods of torture, but they illustrate that there was a similar sense of order to how torture was administered in Tadmur Prison both before and during the Damascus Spring. This violence targeted particular members of the opposition that posed the greatest threat to the regime. For example, the Amnesty International report claims that "those held in connection with Islamist groups or the pro-Iraqi Ba'th party [were] said to bear the brunt of the most severe forms of torture."[169] Therefore, the scale of torture that was occurring during the first part of Bashar al-Assad's presidency appears to have been similar to that used by his father. In fact, the condition of torture actually improved as the prison population dropped from 14,000 in 1997 to 11,829 in 2003, causing the prison system to operate below full capacity.[170]

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[167] Amnesty International, *SYRIA: Torture, despair and dehumanization in Tadmur Military Prison*, 10.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid, 17.
[170] World Prison Brief, "World Prison Brief Data: Syria," published by the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research at Birkbeck, 2018, https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/syria.

Since people were living in fear of the legacy of the Hama massacre, few citizens acted in a way that posed a threat to the regime that would require more violence and torture. This was the condition of torture preceding the Arab Spring.

However, the scale of torture radically changed in 2011, becoming widespread and focused on extermination. Even the title of the Amnesty International report in 2016 demonstrates the evolution of torture in Syria, "Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison Syria." Amnesty International wrote the following report on the treatment of prisoners in Saydnaya Prison after the beginning of Arab Spring and Civil War:

> There are two detention centers at Saydnaya Military Prison, which may hold between 10,000 and 20,000 people. In the "red building", the majority of detainees are civilians who have been arrested since the beginning of the crisis in 2011. In the "white building", the majority of detainees are officers and soldiers in the Syrian military who have also been arrested since 2011. Thousands of people detained in the red building have been killed in secret extrajudicial executions, after being held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance. The killings have taken the form of mass hangings. Before they are hanged, the victims are condemned to death in "trials" at the Military Field Court located in the al-Qaboun neighborhood of Damascus, which last between one and three minutes. On the day the prison authorities carry out the hangings, which they refer to as "the party", they collect the victims from their cells in the afternoon. The listed detainees are told that they will be transferred to a civilian prison. Instead, they are brought to a cell in the basement of the red building, where they are severely beaten over the course of two or three hours. In the middle of the night, they are blindfolded and transferred in delivery trucks or minibuses to the white building. There, they are taken into a room in the basement and hanged. This takes place once or twice a week, and on each occasion between 20 and 50 people are hanged to death.[171]

These mass hangings differ greatly from the torture previously used in Tadmur prison, yet it is still torture because of the element of purposefully inflicted suffering by state officials. Instead, of the torture being used to extract confessions or threaten Islamists, the use of violence is clearly intended to physically exterminate the opposition

[171] Amnesty International, *Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison*, 6.

as a whole. This new goal is reflected in the dramatic increase in the number of prisoners killed in detention as the result of torture.[172] In 2011, "the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that 1,215 Syrians, including 34 children and 17 women, died from torture during detention by the government authorities."[173] This number is dramatically higher than the previous total number of torture-related prison causalities. The scale of the torture experienced in Syria since 2011 is more similar to a massacre than the torture practiced previously by the Bashar regime. It is focused on eliminating the opposition as a whole because of the threat posed by the new mobilizing structures. The opposition was no longer just made up of a few dissidents, and as the outcomes of the other protests in Tunisia and Egypt suggested, this movement had the potential to take down the regime. The onset of the civil war only furthered the danger posed by the opposition and newly militarized forces.

Therefore, in order to maintain regime strength and get rid of a quickly growing opposition, the state moved to carrying out a massacre to scare citizens into submission in a manner similar to that of the 1982 Hama massacre. The level of dissidence Hafez al-Assad faced in 1982 was also unprecedented, and the state needed to quickly show that it was in control.[174] The regime turned to using a massacre because, despite the arrest of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, torture was not working to dissuade them from challenging the regime. States use torture to prevent dissidence by threatening

[172] Ibid, 17.
[173] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2011 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria," (United States, 2012), https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2011humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper.
[174] Azmat Khan, "On 30th Anniversary of Hama Massacre, Syrian Troops Lock Down City," *Frontline*, February 2, 2012, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/on-30th-anniversary-of-hama-massacre-syrian-troops-lock-down-city/.

violence, however once the public is no longer afraid of that violence, torture does little to suppress a movement.

Mobilizing Structures and Repertoires of Contention

The presence of a wall of fear and the change in the scale of torture during the two movements is important to the formation and success of their human rights campaigns working to end torture, because these factors changed how actively the opposition mobilized around the issue. Since there was limited change to the frequency and practice of torture during the Damascus Spring, the mobilizing structures indirectly fought against torture in order to avoid regime backlash. However, since the scale of torture dramatically increased in response to the Arab Spring protests, the opposition actively mobilized to end the practice of torture by collecting evidence of the abuses.

In general, the mobilizing structures established during the Damascus Spring were limited to formal organizations ushered in by the liberal opening created by Bashar al-Assad in 2000. Under Hafez al-Assad, there was intense monitoring of civil society, and NGO activity was limited to charities and religious organizations that did not perform advocacy work.[175] However, according to Freedom House, "Syria received an upward trend arrow [in 2000] due to a small relaxation of controls over freedom of assembly and freedom of expression."[176] Under Bashar al-Assad, Human Rights Watch reported that a number of new associations were able to form, like human rights organizations.[177] These new mobilizing structures included the Syrian

[175] Marieke Bosman, "The NGO sector in Syria – an overview," *International NGO Training and Research Cente*r, June 2012, https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Briefing-Paper-30-The-NGO-sector-in-Syria.pdf, 5.
[176] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2001 - Syria," *Refworld*, 2001, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5278c90a3.html.
[177] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria II. Recommendations*.

Human Rights Association and the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights.[178] Other groups like the Committees of the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria resumed their activities.[179] These organizations were assisted by the release of human rights activists from Syrian prisons by Bashar al-Assad.[180]

Nevertheless, there was an absence of organizations with a significant focus on stopping torture. Instead, the opposition targeted issues that facilitated torture, such as the release of political prisoners and the cessation of the 1963 Emergency Law. The Statement of 99 and the Statement of 1000 also did not explicitly ask for an end to the practice of torture.[181] The opposition passively used their repertoires of contention to advocate for the issue of torture because they "were wary of a regime that could still pounce on them in a heartbeat if necessary and aware that they did not want to provoke Bashar al-Asad too much."[182] Calling out the Assad regime for the practice of state-sponsored torture would have been too negative of a criticism, and so they asked for the "sugar-coated"[183] reforms instead. The legacy of the Hama massacre and the regime's potential for backlash kept the opposition from being too revolutionary. Additionally, since the scale of torture remained the same during that period, the opposition did not feel as though it was necessary to address the issue immediately.

However, during the Arab Spring, because the scale of torture was much greater and the people were no longer afraid of the state, the campaign to end the practice of torture led to widespread mobilizing structures. More people were being impacted by the

[178] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 88.
[179] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe*.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Al-Hayat, "Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals."
[182] Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 86.
[183] Ibid, 88.

state's violence and they now had the courage to speak out against it. In contrast to the Damascus Spring, the Arab Spring saw the onset of large demonstrations intended to bring awareness to the state's abuses, like the protests in Daraa that started after the torture of a group of young people. These demonstrations relied on everyday social networks and implemented repertoires of contention such as social media and public protests. Unfortunately, the demonstrations led to more violence, and so the human rights campaign to end the practice of torture turned toward formal mobilizing structures that relied on the repertoire of contention of evidence collection. Some of these formal structures include the Violation Documentation Center in Syria, the Syrian Center for Statistics and Research, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights.[184]

These organizations quickly gained supporters as they were less dangerous than the protests because they focused on documenting the abuses of the Assad regime, instead of removing Assad from office. The repertoire of evidence collection was effective because of the growing scale of torture in Syria, and the vast amount of evidence it produced. People were also easily able to participate in the movement by documenting the violence that they witnessed with the technology available to them. In the year leading up to the Arab Spring, 11,696,000 Syrians had a mobile phone subscription.[185] This number is significantly higher than the 30,000 Syrians who had a mobile phone subscription at the time of the Damascus Spring. Individuals who used their phones and personal cameras to document regime violence were referred to as

[184] Enab Baladi Online, "These Are the Syrian NGOs Working to Defend Human Rights," *The Syrian Observer*, December 11, 2017, https://syrianobserver.com/EN/features/21640/these_are_syrian_ngos_working_defend_human_rights.html.
[185] The World Bank, "*Mobile Phone Subscriptions*," produced by The World Bank Group, 2019, https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators.

citizen journalists. Citizen journalists "began to work spontaneously as they started filming the events they witnessed using their phone and digital cameras, later sending images to revolution pages on Facebook."[186]

Collecting physical evidence of state-sponsored torture was harder than documenting the brutality of the state, because unlike the public protests, torture occurred inside of military detention centers. However, the security forces occasionally returned the bodies of torture victims, allowing for images of the torture to be widely shared. For example, the body of Hamza al-Khatib, "a thirteen-year-old who was killed in regime custody," was returned home, and photos and videos of his tortured body were widely viewed online and shared with the media.[187] Another example of this work includes the documentary, *For Sama*, which was filmed by a resident of Aleppo, Waad al-Kateab, and produced in partnership with PBS Frontline. While this film was not first published on social media, the method for capturing the footage was identical to that of the citizen journalists. In one scene, al-Kateab records residents of Aleppo waking up to over thirty bodies in the nearby river. Her husband, a doctor, examined the bodies and said they were victims of torture and execution.[188] On YouTube alone, the film has over 111,715 views as of April 2020, and it won Best Documentary at the British Academy of Film Awards.[189]

[186] Obaida Fares, "The Arab Spring Comes to Syria,"193.
[187] Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled*, 103.
[188] Waad al-Kateab, "For Sama (full film) | FRONTLINE," Frontline, November 19, 2019, video, 1:24:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jFHbo0Cgu8.
[189] Omar Ahmed, "Syria film 'For Sama' wins BAFTA award," *Middle East Monitor*, February 3, 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200203-syria-film-for-sama-wins-bafta-award/.

The collection of this physical evidence of torture has generated more support for the campaign, especially among foreigners, as human rights movements are directly posting these images on Facebook, YouTube, and other Western media sources. For example, Amnesty International made a video about Saydnaya prison, "Inside Saydnaya: Syria's Torture Prison," and it has 300,337 views on YouTube as of April 2020. However, the most important outcome of the collection of this physical evidence is its potential use in future legal cases to hold members of the Assad regime accountable for their crimes. According to the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, "the first trial worldwide about state torture in Syria is expected to start in Germany in 2020."[190]

Trials like this one in Germany are the work of a new transnational network that has formed between the Syrian NGOs collecting physical evidence of torture and the European court system. The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights has been coordinating the network with the help of Syrian human rights lawyers, like Anwar al-Bunni, a survivor of torture himself.[191] This transnational network has become an effective mobilizing structure for the human rights campaign to end the practice of state-sponsored torture, because it relies on the repertoires of contention of evidence gathering and the court system. As previously explained, evidence gathering is an effective repertoire because it allows for widespread participation and generates outside interest in the movement. The repertoire of the court system is equally as effective, because the

[190] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, "HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA: TORTURE UNDER ASSAD," *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights*, https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Sondernewsletter_Dossiers/Dossier_Syria_2019December.pdf, 1.
[191] Deborah Amos, "How Syrians who fled their country are pursuing justice after torture from the regime," interview with Deborah Amos, Audie Cornish, Ari Shapiro, Patrick Kroker, and Anwar al-Bunni, [transcript], *All Things Considered,* National Public Radio, September 24, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2011/07/22/138599515/why-are-arab-spring-protests-held-on-friday.

outcome of the trials carries political weight, which will impact the Assad regime as it attempts to return to engaging in trade and political negotiations with the international community. If Assad wants to work with other countries, especially those where the cases are being held, then he will be pressured to comply with the findings of the court.

For this first trial, the German Federal Court has arrested two members of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, Anwar R. and Eyad A. These two men both "left Syria in 2012 and applied for asylum in Germany," despite their criminal histories.[192] European courts are able to prosecute the cases because of the principle of universal jurisdiction. Germany is one of the best legal forums in which to use this principle, because it practices pure universal jurisdiction, which means that it can prosecute any case concerning genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes without the case having any direct tie to Germany.[193] Additionally, since many former Syrian officials have fled to Germany, it is easier for the German courts to arrest these individuals and physically bring them to trial.[194]

The plaintiffs, fourteen victims of Syrian torture, are using their testimonies and accusations as the basis of their claims.[195] However, the credibility of hearsay evidence can often be challenged in court,[196] so "in addition to the testimonies of the victims, photographical evidence, and metadata, numerous public documents and reports have

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[192] Hayley Evans, "Can German Courts Bring Accountability for Torture in Syria?" *Lawfare*, February 22, 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/can-german-courts-bring-accountability-torture-syria.
[193] Human Rights Watch, "The Legal Framework for Universal Jurisdiction in Germany," (New York City: Human Rights Watch, 2014), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/IJ0914German_0.pdf, 1-2.
[194] Amos, "How Syrians who fled their country are pursuing justice after torture from the regime."
[195] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, "HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA: TORTURE UNDER ASSAD," 5-6.
[196] Officer of the United Nations Commissioner for Human rights, *Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (Geneva: United Nations, 2004), https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/training8Rev1en.pdf, 24.

also been used as sources for the criminal complaints."[197] One of the largest sources of this physical evidence is the Caesar Files. In August 2013, a former military photographer for the Assad regime, code-named Caesar, stole more the 50,000 images documenting the systematic torture and extermination of Syrians within military detention centers. He gave the images to the Syrian National Movement, who then gave them to Human Rights Watch.[198] The images were examined by medical professionals who were able to identify the cause of death and types of torture used on the victims.[199] These images are particularly helpful to the case because they contain metadata, which provides very specific details about the image including the date and location of the photo.[200]

Despite the great potential of these trials, this mobilizing structure does have some drawbacks. For example, these new transnational networks are targeting former officers close to Assad because they are unable to prosecute Assad and his closest officials given the principle of diplomatic immunity established in the *Arrest Warrant* case.[201] This case set the precedent that sitting heads of state and high-level government officials cannot be prosecuted for offenses, even those like genocide.[202] Only once an official has left office can they be prosecuted for these

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[197] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, "FIRST CRIMINAL TRIAL WORLDWIDE ON TORTURE IN SYRIA TO START APRIL 2020 IN GERMANY," *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights,* https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/first-criminal-trial-worldwide-on-torture-in-syria-to-start-2020-in-germany/.
[198] Nadim Houry and Priyanka Motaparthy, **"**If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities," *Human Rights Watch*, December 16, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities.
[199] Human Rights Watch, "If the Dead Could Speak," Human Rights Watch, December 15, 2015, video, 14:47, https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/video/2015/12/15/if-dead-could-speak.
[200] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, " 'CAESAR' PHOTOS DOCUMENT SYSTEMATIC TORTURE," *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights*, https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/caesar-photos-document-systematic-torture/.
[201] Pieter H.F. Bekker, "World Court Orders Belgium to Cancel an Arrest Warrant Issued Against the Congolese Foreign Minister," *American Society of International Law* 7, no. 2 (2002), https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/7/issue/2/world-court-orders-belgium-cancel-arrest-warrant-issued-against-congolese.
[202] Evans, "Can German Courts Bring Accountability for Torture in Syria?"

crimes. Therefore, as long as Assad is in power he will be immune to arrest. Nevertheless, there is still future potential because the available evidence will only continue to grow, and it utilizes a repertoire of contention that stands out as one of the only ways for the opposition to take collective action without the influence of Assad's allies.

Foreign Alliances

Just like during the greater Damascus Spring and Arab Spring uprisings, the influence of Syria's allies prevented the success of the human rights campaigns to stop torture. During the Damascus Spring, Syria's allies were able to steer international attention away from Assad's abuses, preventing international mobilization against the state's backlash. There were eventually reports on the regime's crackdown, but they came too late to offer the opposition any protection. This is the same argument made in the previous chapter, because the campaign to stop the practice of torture was directly incorporated into the general movement. During the Arab Spring, on the other hand, the export of weapons to Syria has led to extreme violence against the opposition that has weakened the campaign to stop the practice of torture. Syria's allies have also used their own power in international political and legal organizations to prevent other countries from taking-action to stop the crimes against humanity.

As previously mentioned, while much of the campaign's weakness during the Damascus Spring was caused by its own exclusive mobilizing structures and ineffective repertoires of contention, Syria's allies also did not support the movement in order to protect their own national interests. Just a simple internet search shows that the international community was aware of what was going on in Syria in terms of both the state's continued use of torture and the backlash against Damascus Spring. There were reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch,

and the U.S. State Department claiming that the Syrian regime frequently used torture during the time period of the Damascus Spring. Additionally, when members of the Damascus Spring were arrested, groups like Human Rights Watch and the U.S. State Department even called out the Assad regime for its limited liberalization.[203] However, most of these reports and other attention from the media was published well after the arrests and closures that fragmented the campaign.

International actors failed to mobilize simultaneously with domestic actors because they needed Assad's assistance at the same time that he was beginning his domestic backlash. The Arab world was swept up in the Second Intifada, and the Arab League needed Syrian support for its 2002 Peace Plan.[204] The U.S. also needed Syria's help in collecting intelligence for its War on Terror. If international and domestic actors do not work together, then the domestic actors are vulnerable to the repression of the state. The Syrians working on the ground needed the protection of foreign countries to ensure that they were able to mobilize to the point where they could sustain an attack. However, the Damascus Spring movement lacked this protection, and so the backlash of the regime prevented major progress in the field of human rights. Before the international movement drew awareness to Syria's backlash in late 2001 and 2002, the Syrian government implemented changes to civil society such as requiring organizations hosting meetings to receive extensive approval ahead of time.[205] Such restrictions prevented a new major development in human rights until 2004 with the establishment of a Syrian branch of the Arab Organization for Human Rights in Syria.[206]

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[203] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2001 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria" and Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 2001- Syria: Human Rights Developments.*
[204] Al Jazeera, "The Arab Peace Initiative," US & Canada, *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2010, https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2009/01/200912764650608370.html.
[205] Wikas, *Battling the Lion of Damascus*, 12.
[206] Human Rights Watch, "No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria."

It cannot be forgotten that one reason that these campaigns were so easily silenced, was because they failed to directly act on the issue of torture. The blind spot in the movement's advocacy was caused by their desire to avoid pushing the regime too far. However, even when there was physical evidence of torture and human rights based-sanctions coming from foreign countries during the Arab Spring, Syria's international allies continued to protect the Assad regime and further the practice of torture. Syria's main allies in this period have consisted of Russia and Iran, who have been giving Syria billions of dollars in military aid to support Assad's suppression of the opposition. According to the Chatham Institute;

> At the peak of its military intervention in 2015, IHS Jane estimated the cost of the Russian involvement at $2.4 million–$4 million a day, this amounts to $2.5 billion–$4.5 billion since September 2015. In comparison, the US State Department estimates that Iran has spent over $16 billion in Syria since 2012. According to Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader in international affairs, Tehran provides $8 billion a year to support the Syrian regime's survival, amounting to $48 billion over the same period.[207]

While it is hard to calculate the exact monetary value of the assistance from Iran and Russia, it is obvious that in a country with a total GDP of just over $50 billion in 2017, the billions of dollars that Iran and Russia have invested in the war has had a significant impact on Syria.[208] Their assistance has facilitated the fragmentation of the human rights movement by killing its members and worsening the condition of torture in Syria that these groups have tried to improve.

Countries like Russia and Iran do not care that Assad is committing these crimes because of their vested interest in Syria, and their own poor human rights records. The U.S. State Department found that in Russia, there were reports that "security forces used torture as a form of punishment against detained opposition and human rights activists,

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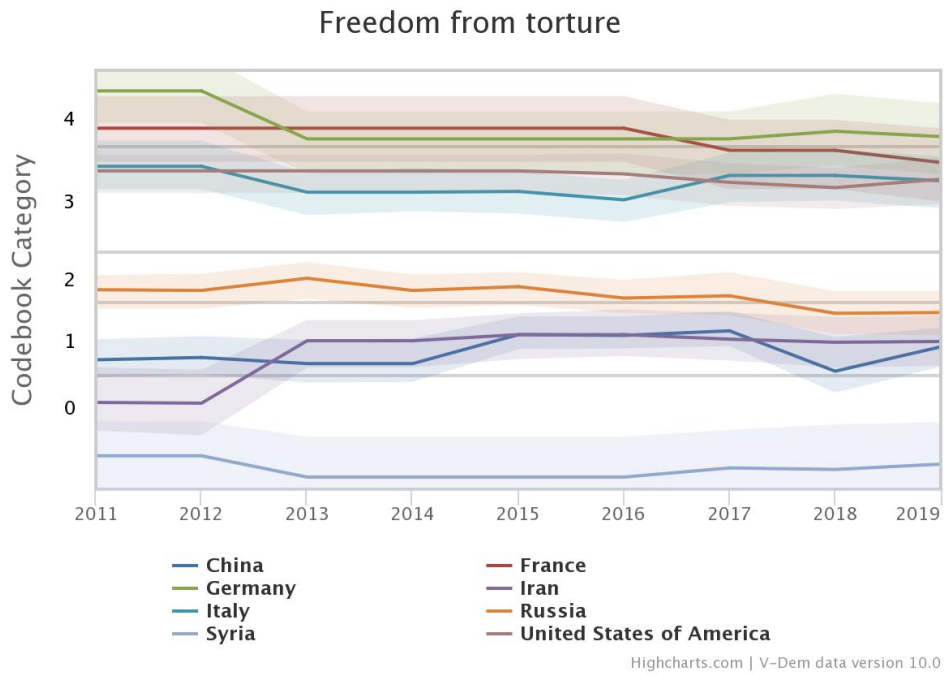
[207] Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria* (London: Chatham House, 2019), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf, 3.
[208] University of Groningen and University of California, Davis, "Real GDP at Constant National Prices."

journalists, and critics of government policies."[209] Additionally, in Iran, torture is used as punishment for participating in protests, practicing Sunni Islam, opposing the government, and other security issues.[210] Figure 15 illustrates the Freedom from Torture in countries allied with Syria and in other countries that are important to the region.

Figure 15: Freedom from Torture of Syria's Allies



Source: V-DEM[211]

The top cluster, or the countries who use the least amount of torture, are Germany, France, the United States, and Italy. The bottom cluster, or the country that uses the most torture,

[209] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Russia," (United States, 2020), https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia/.
[210] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran," (United States, 2020). https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-%20practices/iran/.
[211] V-DEM: Varieties of Democracy, "Variable Graph," University of Gothenburg, 2020, https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/.

is Syria. The middle cluster, or the countries that use less torture than Syria but significantly more than the top cluster, are Russia, Iran, and China.[212] China is included in this graph because their economic relationship with Syria has prompted them to protect Assad and further the practice of torture. What this graph shows, is that Syria's key allies have a poor record of torture themselves, so they do not have a moral obligation to stop the torture in Syria. Therefore, no matter how great the pressure from domestic or international actors like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the ECCHR, as long as Syria plays an important role in the conflicts and economy of the Middle East, Russia, Iran, and China will protect the Assad regime with financial, military, and legal support.

Furthermore, Syria's alliances with Russia and China are of particular concern, because these nations hold enormous power in the international political bodies that provide some of the only ways to stop crimes against humanity. Since Russia and China hold veto power in the UN Security Council, they have been able to block resolutions that condemn Syria's torture. While China has not been actively involved in the civil war, because of their economic relationship with Syria they had been helping Russia protect the Assad regime. Amnesty International voiced their frustration concerning the situation in the following statement by Sherine Tadros, head of UN office in New York for Amnesty International:

> For six years Russia, with the support of China, has blocked Security Council decisions that would have punitive consequences for the Syrian government. This behavior prevents justice and emboldens all parties to the conflict in Syria to act with indifference to international law. The message coming from the international community is that when it comes to Syria, there are no red lines.[213]

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[212] China was Syria's second largest importer in 2010 (World Integrated Trade Solution, "Syrian Arab Republic All Products Import").

[213] Amnesty International "UN: Russia and China's abusive use of veto 'shameful'," *Amnesty International*, February 18, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/un-russia-and-chinas-abusive-use-of-veto-shameful/.

The Russia's veto power had also prevented the International Criminal Court from becoming involved in the issue until the first cases against Syria were filed in 2019.[214] Syria has been immune to the court's jurisdiction, because it is "not a party to the Rome Statute (the ICC's governing treaty) [and] the only other means by which the ICC could investigate alleged crimes committed in Syria is via a United Nations Security Council referral… [However,] Russia a strong ally of the Assad regime, has vetoed or threatened to veto all efforts by the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the ICC."[215]

It should be noted that there have been a number of countries that have pressured the Assad regime to stop using torture. For example, on December 20, 2019, the United States passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which "provides for sanctions and travel restrictions on those who provide support to members of the Assad regime, in addition to Syrian and international enablers who have been responsible for, or complicit in serious human rights abuses in Syria."[216] Nevertheless, this action was not effective because Syria is not economically dependent on the West.

Therefore, the Assad regime is viable as long as Russia, Iran, and China maintain their financial, military, and legal support, which seems likely because of the other countries that have become involved in the civil war, like Saudi Arabia and the United States. Assad will not turn on its allies because he needs them, and his allies will not turn on Assad for fear of losing economic, political, and ideological dominance in the region. Therefore, regardless of the effectiveness or

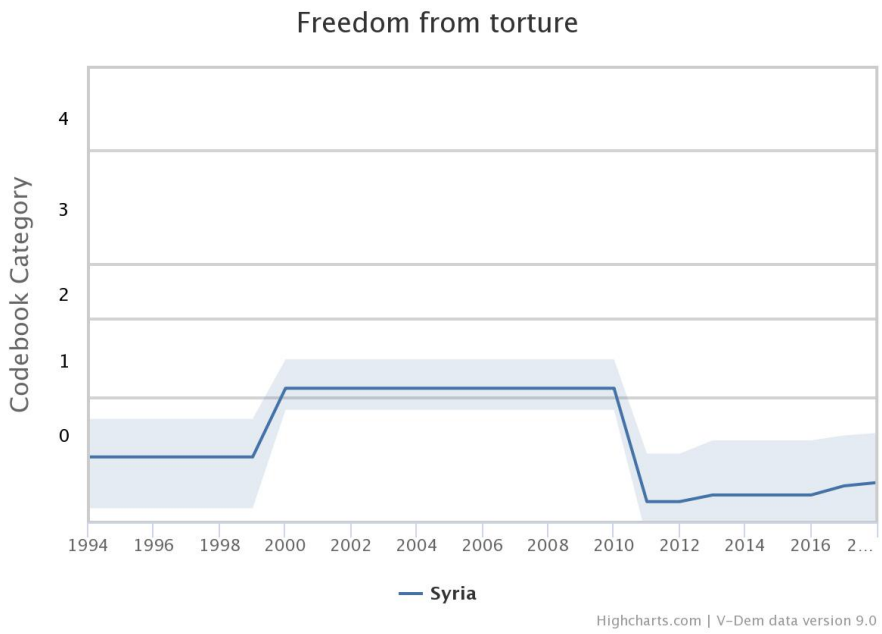
[214] Matt Killingsworth, "Justice, Syria and the International Criminal Court," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, December 24, 2019, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/justice-syria-international-criminal-court/.
[215] Matt Killingsworth, "Justice, Syria and the International Criminal Court."
[216] Michael Pompeo, "Passage of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019," *U.S. Embassy in Syria*, Dec. 20, 2019, https://sy.usembassy.gov/passage-of-the-caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act-of-2019/.

ineffectiveness of the human rights campaign to stop torture, the movement will fail as long as Syria has strong foreign alliances.

Outcome

As explained previously in this paper, both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring were not successful movements, and the campaigns to stop torture were no exception. If one refers back to the Freedom from Torture Index, it is clear that despite the efforts of domestic and international activists, the Assad regime still frequently practiced torture during and after both uprisings.

Figure 16: Freedom from Torture Index 1994-2019



Source: V-DEM[217]

[217] V-DEM: Varieties of Democracy, "Variable Graph."

There was a slight improvement in the Freedom from Torture Index during the Damascus Spring as a result of prisoner releases and the closure of several detention centers. However, these concessions were state-sponsored, and the domestic movement did little to expand on these reforms out of fear of backlash. Therefore, these improvements were not significant enough to prevent the regime from using torture as a means to stop the opposition during the Arab Spring. Assad's backlash against these protestors has led to the death of more than 104,000 people by torture in Syrian detention centers.[218] The fact that the state has been using torture as the means by which it attacks the opposition has created a major challenge for the campaigns working to end the practice of torture in Syria. Not only must they work harder to keep up with the ever-increasing number of abuses, but their own organizations are losing members and critical leaders.[219] The involvement of Syria's allies has only furthered complicated the movement's work by preventing the opportunities that the opposition gains from initiating a threat spiral within the state. Assad has been able to backlash against the opposition whenever he feels threatened because of the physical resources coming from his allies and the legal protection they offer. The comparison of the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring shows that the only factor these two movements have in common is the interference of Syria's allies, and so it is the causal factor that led to the similar outcome in both periods.

However, it would be misleading to say that the campaign has died. Organizations like the Syrian Network for Human Rights are still documenting the names of victims of torture. They have already recorded the names of 13,608 people who died from torture

[218] Syrian Observatory of Human Right, "Syria: 560,000 killed in seven yrs of war, SOHR."
[219] Daher, *Syria after the Uprisings*, 73.

inside Syrian detention centers between March 2011 and August 2018.[220] The evidence they are collecting is allowing for a transnational network to begin holding former members of the Assad regime accountable in the court of law. The trials in Germany have the potential to begin a very successful opportunity spiral, because the more officials who are tried and found guilty, the more pressure that will be placed on the Assad regime. Since the trials use the repertoire of contention of a court system based on the principle of universal jurisdiction, Assad's allies will be unable to stop the trials. The trials may even weaken Syria's foreign alliances as other countries fear being found complicit in Assad's crimes. Therefore, the human rights campaign to end torture in Syria is far from over, and the outcome must be reevaluated after the movement has had time to fully implement this new mobilizing structure and its repertoires of contention.

[220] Evans, "Can German Courts Bring Accountability for Torture in Syria?"

Conclusion

The reports that have come out of Syria since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 have shocked the world with their level of brutality. It is now clear why Amnesty International included the quote, "Saydnaya is the end of life- the end of humanity"[221] in their 2016 report. However, this research has proven that this is not the first time that the Assad regime has acted in this manner. Instead, the state has been able to torture its citizens for half a century with little to no repercussions. There have been uprisings and human rights campaigns that have tried to improve the situation in Syria. The 2000 Damascus Spring was able to mobilize a small group of Syrian intellectuals and international actors around the idea of democratization when Bashar al-Assad first became president. Then the 2011 Arab Spring generated widespread domestic support of regime change and protecting human rights by securing the alliance of both international organizations and Western nations. Nevertheless, both movements failed to achieve reforms because Assad's loyal allies have propped up his regime and facilitated the backlash that has fragmented these campaigns.

According to the "spiral model," the activism that took place during both of these movements should have achieved increased freedom from torture because the pressure from above and pressure from below should have motivated the state to comply with human rights norms. This was the pattern observed in other countries, including Morocco, after experiencing a similar level of pressure. However, the original "spiral model" could not accurately predict the outcome of these uprisings, because uprisings mobilize domestic and international actors at the same time. The original "spiral model" suggests that domestic mobilization only comes after a period of external action. Therefore, the original "spiral model" had to be adapted to comply

[221] Amnesty International, *Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison,* 5.

with the additional elements of contentious politics. The new contentious "spiral model" that was introduced begins with a repression phase just like the original "spiral model," but it is followed by a period of social change. This social change then activates domestic and international mobilizing structures simultaneously that use repertoires of contention to initiate an opportunity spiral. The further this opportunity spiral progresses, the more the state is threatened. With the successful completion of an opportunity spiral comes changed policies and actions on the part of the state until finally there is an absence of human rights violations.

In the case of both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring, there was a period of severe repression followed by a social change. During the Damascus Spring, this social change was the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and the following liberal opening created by Bashar al-Assad. During the Arab Spring, the social change was initiated by a regional movement that lowered the revolutionary threshold of citizens in Syria. As a result of the protests in other Arab countries like Tunisia, Syrians no longer felt the need to hide behind a wall of fear. These social changes initiated the uprisings in 2000 and 2011 that were characterized by domestic and international mobilizing structures. Unfortunately, those of the Damascus Spring were too exclusive too gain real support for the cause. The formal structures used repertoires of contention such as salons and formal statements that were only accessible to the intellectual elite. They also failed to directly challenge the regime on the issue of torture because they feared a backlash similar to that of the Hama massacre.

Contrastingly, the opposition during the Arab Spring relied on everyday social networks and repertoires of contention such as large demonstrations and social media that opened up the movement to a diversity of participants. This widespread mobilization extended itself to the campaign to end the practice of torture, especially since the scale of torture dramatically

increased during the Arab Spring. Torture was no longer intended to scare the opposition into submission, instead, it was designed to exterminate the opposition as whole. This development prompted organizations to shift their focus to evidence collection as a way to prepare for taking collective action against torture in the future. Syrians were able to collect this evidence of the abuses using their phones and sharing the images on social media or with civil society.

The following figures summarize these various elements of the contentious "spiral model" and their outcomes during both the Damascus Spring and the Arab Spring.

Figure 17: Contentious "Spiral Model" for the 2000 Damascus Spring with Foreign Alliances

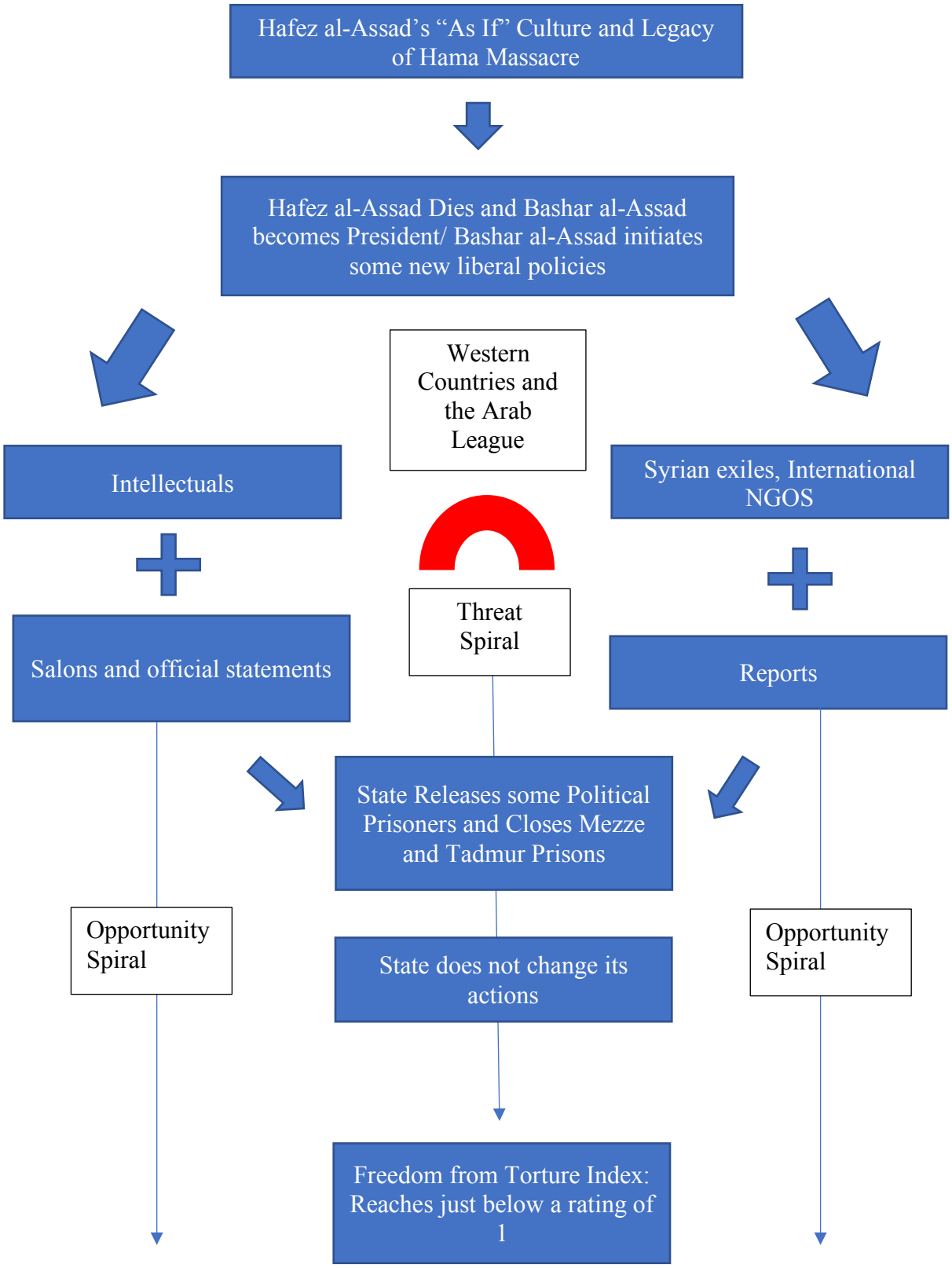
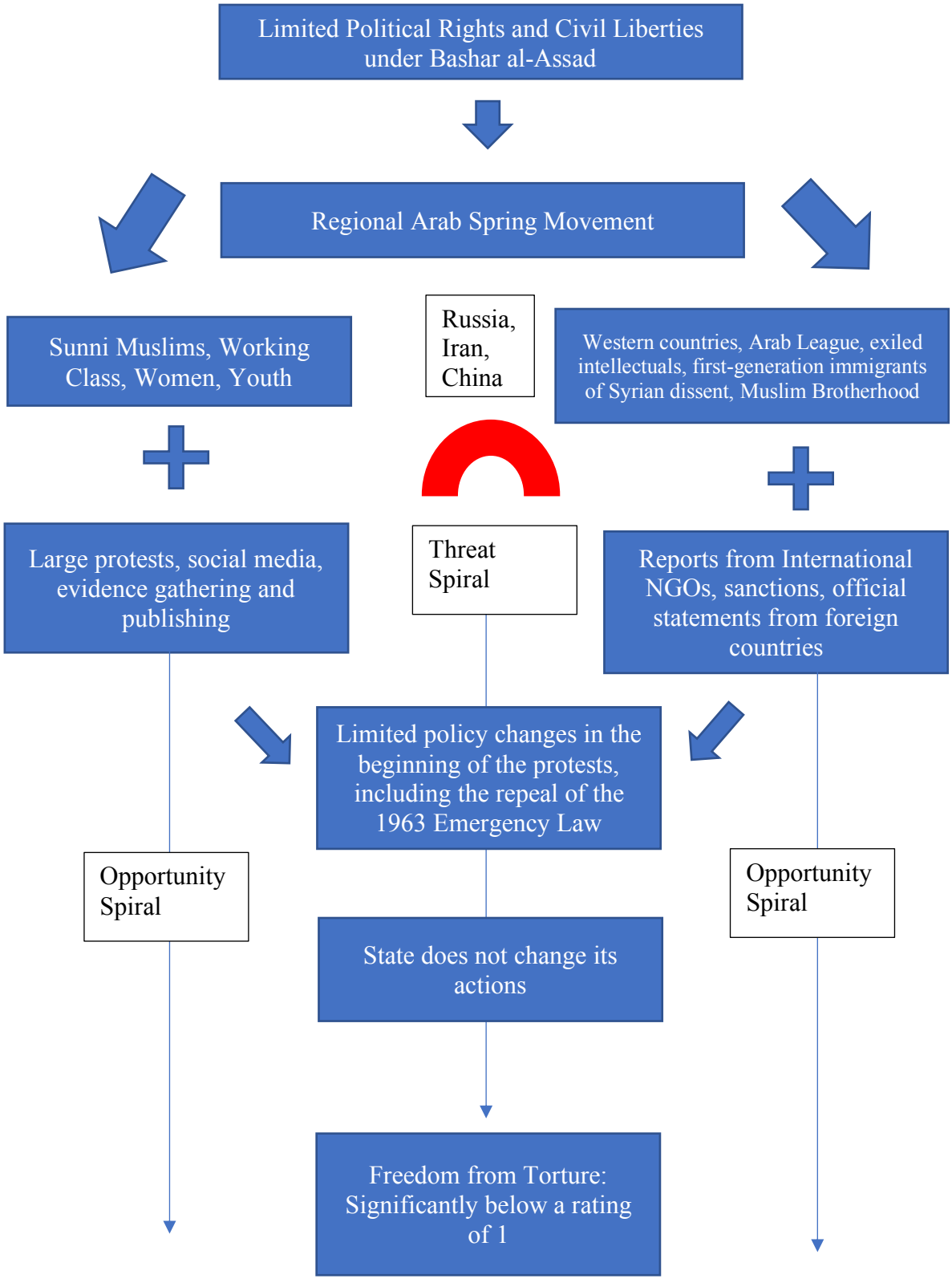


Figure 18: Contentious "Spiral Model" for the 2011 Arab Spring with Foreign Alliances



It is evident that regardless of the effectiveness of the different mobilizing structures and repertoires of contention, both movements ultimately failed because of the interference of Syria's allies. That is the only factor that remains constant between the two uprisings and campaigns. Syria's allies prevented the opportunities gained by the opposition from initiating a threat spiral within the state. During the Damascus Spring, Syria's allies ignored Assad's backlash against the opposition, allowing him to deflect its threatening demands made in the Statement of 1000. These countries, which included Western and Arab nations, displayed leniency because they needed the support of Syria in resolving the Second Intifada and fighting the War on Terror. The state's backlash took the form of arresting key leaders of the movement, like Riad Seif, which fragmented the campaign. By the time foreign organizations like Amnesty International began to step in and publish their own critical reports, the movement had died. During the Arab Spring, Syria's allies took a direct approach to blocking the opposition and supporting Assad's backlash. Russia and Iran have funded Syria's military, and Russia and China have been vetoing international resolutions to stop Assad's violent attacks on protestors and the torture of citizens in forums like the UN and the ICC. Additionally, other foreign countries delayed their response to the Syrian Arab Spring to protect their own interests in the Middle East, forcing the opposition to militarize and fragmenting the non-militant branch of the opposition. Therefore, the Assad regime has been immune to the onset of a threat spiral and the need to reform because of Syria's geopolitical significance in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, there is a new mobilizing structure being used by the campaign to end the practice of state-sponsored torture that has the potential to pressure Assad to make concessions because it acts independently of Syria's allies. A transnational network has been established between domestic groups working with Syrians on the ground and the European court system.

The network is arresting former members of the Assad regime with the hope of holding them accountable for their crimes. It is using the physical evidence collected by the domestic Syrian movement in order to strengthen the claims made in the cases. While this mobilizing structure cannot directly pressure Assad because of the protection offered to him under the principle of diplomatic immunity, it has the potential to gradually initiate a threat spiral. The more people the network can arrest, the fewer people that remain loyal to Assad. Additionally, if the Assad regime wants to be reintegrated into international politics, then it may be forced to recognize the legitimacy of these trials. This repertoire is so effective because it is based on the principle of universal jurisdiction, which gives legal jurisdiction to countries with no direct connection to the case, avoiding the veto power of countries like Russia and China.

In conclusion, this research has exposed some important truths regarding the successful implementation of human rights norms. For many years scholars simply suggested applying the same tried and true method of increased pressure from all sides, but as this case study on Syria has demonstrated that method is not only flawed, but even dangerous. That strategy ignores the fact that most countries will prioritize their own national interests at the expense of the human rights, and even lives, of another nation's citizens. In Syria, thousands of activists and protestors have been arrested or died trying to force the Assad regime to change, just to be undermined by regional geopolitics. It would be completely wrong to say that no one should have written the Statement of 1000 in 2001 or taken to the streets in 2011. What is wrong is the way that the entire world supported the opposition. International actors failed to work together with their domestic counterparts, and they focused on targeting the state itself before they addressed the foreign assistance that has provided for the regime's survival. Until human rights campaigns can

convince the world that the world's interests are their own national interests, senseless violence, like what is occurring in Syria, will continue to impact the lives of countless, innocent civilians.

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