

## Strong State vs. Weak Society

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the distribution of material capabilities in state society relations is the main factor shaping the regime of Middle Eastern states. This premise suggests that sustainable democracy in the Arab world fails to flourish because states with their centralized bureaucracies are too powerful compared to the large portions of the societies. Even with the somewhat limited power and influence of the most affluent members of civil society, there are no real autonomous actors in the Middle East beyond the central state. Civil Society is too weak to check the state's continuing power. This is the most fundamental cause for the lack of democratization in the Middle East. States are too strong societies are too weak.

**Keywords:** distribution of material capabilities, strong state, weak society, the Middle East, democracy

**Özet:** Bu çalışma maddi imkânlarındağılınınOrtadoğı'daki rejimleri şekillendiren en temel faktör olduğunu savunur. Sürdürülebilir bir demokrasini ortaya çıkmaması toplumun büyükçoğunluğukarşısında devletlerin yerleşikbürokrasileriyleçokgüçlüolmasıyla ilişkilidir. Kısıtlı bir sivil toplum varlığına rağmen merkezi devletin karşındagerçek anlamda otonom sivil toplum aktörleri yoktur. Sivil toplum devletin süregelengütcükarşısında denetim içinçokzayıftır. Bu durum demokrasi eksikliğinin en temel sebebidir. Devletlerçokgüçlü toplumlar ise çokzayıftır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** maddi imkânların dağılımı, güçlü devlet, zayıf toplum, Ortadoğı, demokrasi

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## Introduction

The lack of democratic governments in Arab societies is one of the most widely discussed issues in the Middle Eastern politics. Numerous approaches have been developed to explain this deficit. Since mid-1980s, comparative social scientists have striven to explain the lack of democracy in the Middle East.

In particular, these social scientists have explored the cultural, historical, political, economic and social factors surrounding the issues of democracy in the Middle East. There are those who believe that the Middle East is considered culturally resistant to democratization. That is to say, politics, culture and history of the Arab and Muslims of the region are incompatible modern democratic values (Kedourie, 1992). Others point to the need for economic and political reforms in order for democracy to be able to take root in the region. This approach is dominated by two schools of thought: (1) “prioritizing political reform and (2) economic reform” (Bellin, 2004). According to the political reform perspective, political liberalization must be initiated for democratizations in the region. In other words, democratic reforms must precede economic liberalization in the region. According to the economic reform approach, economic reforms are required *prior* to political liberalizations due in part to the strong correlation between economic growth and the viability of democracy. Still others who opine about this issue point to social factors inherent in state-society relations that prohibit the growth of democracy in the Middle East; specifically addressing the power struggle among social organizations for domination and the existence of weak states and strong societies (Migdal, 1988:2001).

One additional construct, and the main focus of this paper, explores how the distribution of material capabilities in state-society relations factors into the region’s failure to democratize. In contrast to Migdal’s argumentation of weak state and strong society, this paper asserts that the lack of democratic orientation in the Middle East is attributable to a strong state and weak society, rather than the converse. In other words, it is due to the existence of a strong, central state or rather lack of an autonomous and independent civil society that is the most significant limiting factor to democracy in the Middle East. Idealistically, democracy is a political regime where people choose their leaders and hold their leaders accountable through political

institutions. In order for democracy to flourish, autonomous and independent civil society is required.

More specifically, the power distribution in state-society relations shapes the Middle Eastern regimes. Rentier state structure determines state-society relations. The economic autonomy of its citizens is the initial and most vital prerequisite for the growth of democracy in the Middle East. As long as the state maintains its status as rentier state, controlling a substantial portion of its citizens' behaviors via control of jobs, benefits, and modernization processes, there can be no democratic, political activism in the society. This tendency, combined with the clientelistic nature of the political system as a product of distribution of capabilities in state society relations (especially in certain parts of the Middle East), reinforces authoritarian values (Ciftci, 2010:1145). States are too powerful in relation to the large portions of societies. There is no autonomous counter mechanism in place to balance this power. As a result, this lack of effective autonomous social organizations poses the biggest obstacle to the inauguration of democracy.

No single theory can fully explain democratization. Rather, "a good theory is precise, austere, and elegant and highlights the relations among a few conceptual variables" (Huntington, 1991). Thus, any attempt to explain democratization must provide a coherent theoretical foundation proposing a method for eliminating/simplifying these complex and dense relations. Arguably, it is difficult to explain social developments in such a reductionist way, yet for the sake of simplicity, it may be necessary to adopt a constant and static picture to assist in the evaluation of such a complex relationship. A thorough examination reveals many interrelated factors leading to democratization, or the lack of thereof in the Middle East. While theories of democratization attempt to explain dynamic process, this paper refrains from exploring the numerous interrelated factors behind the lack of sustainable democracy in the region. Instead, the aim of this paper is to distinguish the *most* effective factor from the remaining. Different theories logically follow the assumptions implicit in the theorists' theoretical frameworks, with a direct relationship apparent between the number of assumptions and the degree of subjectivity inherent in the theory since it will require descriptive accuracy. For example, Eva Bellin (2004) argues that regardless of the complexity of the relations, the primary factor contributing to the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East can be determined by the strength of the state and its capacity to maintain a monopoly on the means of coercion.

The scope of this paper does not allow full analysis of why there is lack of sustainable democracy in the Middle East. Rather, this paper seeks to do three things: (1) to provide an alternative explanation for the lack of democracy in the region; and (2) to criticize Joel Migdal's position on weak states and strong societies in the Middle East-(Joel Migdal's famous work "State in Society approach" will be analyzed and a counter argument will be developed); and (3) to discuss the case of Syria based on the premise of this paper.

### **Theories of Democratization**

Generally speaking, theories of democratization deal with the causes of democracy and they delineate the factors leading to the emergence of democracies. The causes of democratization are varied and their significance is likely to vary in future (Huntington,1991:39). Therefore, there are number of different factors that explain democratization.

Since the 1980s, there has been an increased academic interest in democratization studies fueled, in part, by democratic transitions in both Latin American regimes and southern Europe (Brynen, Korany, and Noble 1995). This transition period is often referred as the third wave democratization (Huntington, 1991). While the third wave saw a surge in the academic interest in democracy, little attention was actually paid to any prospect for democracy in the Middle East. According to Huntington "among Islamic countries, particularly those in the Middle East, the prospects for democratic development seem low" (Huntington, 1984:216). Additionally, Lipset, Diamond and Liz (1988: xix) argued that due to absence of democratic experience in the Middle East and North Africa, there appear little prospects for democratic transition. The 1990s, however, saw a shift in focus with a sharper academic increase exhibited in relation to democratic transitions in Middle Eastern studies.

Scholarly writings began proposing conceptual frameworks analyzing the prospect of democracy in the region and exploring the contributing cultural, historical, political, economic and social factors. This paper specifically points to an appreciation of the potency of the state-society dynamics integral to understanding the overall situation. As mentioned previously, and in contrast to Migdal's argumentation of weak states and strong societies, this paper asserts that state-society relations in the Middle East have been misconceptualized. The key player in this interaction is not the primitive society, but rather, the central bureaucracy. Material-based

reading is essential and necessary to understand this relationship. The distribution of material capabilities in state-society relations is the main factor behind the prospect for democracy in the Middle East.

Issues related to political culture, democracy and the Middle East have been hotly debated since the end of Cold War. “The Clash of Civilization Thesis” has brought the debate to forefront; with September 11 only seeking to further peak interest in such discussions. The lack of democracy in the Middle East often attributed to the political culture and history of the region. As Lisa Anderson (1995: 78) observed, “much of the social science literature treats the Arab world as congenitally defective, democratically challenged and seeks to find biological, cultural, and religious causes for this disability”. Patriarchy and patrimonial pattern of politics have always been the central discussion with regard to the lack of democracy in the region. As Bill and Springborg (1994) argued, patrimonial roots of politics can be traced back to the early days of Islam, pointing to the Prophet Muhammad as the model for contemporary patrimonial leaders in the Middle East. In addition, some argue that Islam as a religion with its norms and values does not lend itself to modern democracy; believing that “democracy is alien to mind-set of Islam” (Kedouri, 1992: 1). Islam fails to distinguish between the mundane and God’s realm. As supporters of this argumentation, Bernard Lewis (2002), Gilles Keppel (2002), Oliver Roy (1994) and others can be listed. Indeed, cultural and historical readings of the Middle East are subjective. Political cultural literature on the Middle East is rife with self-fulfilling prophecies seeing politics, culture and history as essentially fixed and uniform (Anderson, 1995, Hinnebusch 2006). Focusing patrimonial pattern of the politics is inevitably essentialist, stereotyping and misleading and finds no causal connections regarding the lack of democracy. Moreover, Islam’s compatibility or lack thereof with democracy often results in a deadlock in democracy discussions. There are no convincing arguments connecting Islam to lack of democracy, with most arguments failing to answer whether it is even possible to modernize Islamic societies.

The literature on political development has agreed that political and economic reforms are directly linked to democratization (Harik, 1992); often categorizing political/economic reforms as divergent. Some argue that economic reforms and development are the very precondition to political liberalization and democratization. This approach was codified in studies on democratization by Seymour Lipset (1959) with his claim that the emergence of

democracy is associated with economic development because democracy is the outcome of capitalism. Following this logic, democracy does not spring from authoritarian regime rather it is a form of advocacy. It is the product of an ongoing struggle between capital, labors(who see democratizations as a tool for accountability and transparency) and elites (who do not want to share their privileged positions); as was evidenced in the early industrializing countries of Western Europe (Bellin, 2000). However, despite the plausibility of this logic, the Middle Eastern societies lack organized working classes or private sectors and capital accumulation because the economy is highly controlled by the state. “State hegemony in the patron state took not only the form of ownership of enterprises but also the form of management control of product mix, crops, prices, wages, and employment practices” (Harik, 1992:4). However, the other camp suggests that political liberalization must come prior to economic reforms because comprehensive political change leads to proper economic reforms and democratization in the Middle East.

This school of thought is dominated by two sides. On the one hand, it is argued that enforcement of economic liberalization might require authoritarian rule because authoritarian regimes do not depend upon elections (Pool, 1993; Hinnebusch, 2000). They are immune from popular opinion and can easily afford to initiate economic policy decisions. While on the other hand, some argue that it is democratic regimes that carry out economic liberalizations successfully (Haggard and Kaufman 1992; Remmer 1990). Whether it is an authoritarian or a democratic regime, regarding the Middle East, political institutionalization is the key. In other words, an effective bureaucracy, party system, leadership and civil society are the defining factors. According to Huntington (1968), the process of liberalization, be it economic or political, is likely to lead to political decay in the region. He (68: 59) argues that “economic development and social mobilization can have disruptive effects. In particular economic development leads to increased economic inequality, while social mobilization makes that inequality less legitimate”. In the Middle East, political institutions between state and society are poorly established and any attempt to reform the political and the economic structure leads political disorder in the country. Even some Western political thinkers believe that systemic liberalization in the Middle East gives way to the rise of radical Islamic groups in the political arena as seen in Algeria, *Front Islamic Salvation* (FIS) (Bellin, 2004). There, the emergence of modern democratic system was endangered by the Islamic groups’ ascendancy to power.

Joel Migdal, in the prologue to “Strong Societies and Weak States”, indicates his purpose for writing the book was to discuss the relationships between political and social organizations; arguing how social and political organizations mutually influence each other. He emphasizes the fragmentations of social organizations, and their impacts on politics. Generally, he asserts that third world politics should be analyzed via the “State in Society Approach” (Migdal, 1988:10-41). This approach, society depicts a *mélange* of social organizations in which society is not structured dichotomously. Initially, social control in society may be exercised by different groups heterogeneously in terms of their forms and rules. Secondly, the power distribution of social control in society may be distributed among autonomous groups. Simply stated, the authority of social and political organizations may be fragmented. In this model, the state is only one of many organizations. Consequently, state-society relations are the key factor explaining democratization in the region. According to Migdal, a strong state is identified as the constant and overwhelming control and presence in the most remote places. The state is capable of extracting resources and fully penetrating society. Conversely, a weak state is defined by ineffective control and the lack of presence in society. Ineffectiveness stems from the nature and structure of societies. “Weak states face the resistance posed by effendis, religious leaders, rich peasants, landlords and other social organizations” (Migdal, 1988:33).

Migdal’s emphasis of state-society relations and the power distribution between them is explanatory. However, his analysis is problematic from two angles. First, he theoretically constructs state-society relations wrong. Second, he empirically argues that social actors in society shape the state structure. While a given political and socio-economic structure in the Middle East continues to exist, there are no autonomous and powerful social organizations capable of structuring the state. The state remains unchallenged. Migdal’s argumentation related to the social structure in the Middle East is doubtful. It lacks explanation with regard to what constitutes the social structure and fails to explain why tribal and traditional life is structurally important in the Middle East. He views state-society relations as a *mélange*. However, it appears to be more one-directional with power running from state to society. The state maintains its power in terms of economics, military and politics. Michael Mann (1984: 135) argued, “territorial-centralization of economic, ideological and military resources has enhanced the despotic power of states”. Theda Skocpol (1979: 32-34) argued that the state’s coercive apparatus faces down any dissatisfaction or insurgency. The same might be said for the

democratic transition in the Middle East. Without the consent of the “coercive apparatus”, political liberalization will not occur (Bellin, 2004:143).

In fact, the concept of *mélange* somewhat ambiguous, adding more subjective assumptions and further complicating Migdal’s argument. It can be used when there are no other explanations. Accordingly, effendis, landlords, tribal organizations, traditional merchants, religious organizations and patron-client relationship determine state-society relations. They are the given social structure of the Middle Eastern societies. Based on this paper’s argument, it is stressed that historically given institutions define unit behavior. None of the determinants of state-society relation can exist by themselves. It is important to understand how these historically given institutions were formed and from where their power is derived from. Indeed, they are the results of patron-clientelist relations and lack the ability to balance the state’s power. Migdal in his *State in Society* approach ignores those structural factors and develops descriptive analysis by taking a historical cinematographic picture. Why he considers them as given is elusive rather than explanatory.

For Migdal, all societies have ongoing power struggles between social groups and the state for domination. The nature and results of these power struggles determine the structure of societies. States, like any other groups, are always in a process of reconstruction and reinvention (Migdal, 2001:12). In many third world countries, states encounter the resistance of social organizations in power allocations. Tribes, patron-client relationships and families are actively involved in this power struggles (Migdal, 2001:50). Societies are web-like hosting a *mélange* of fairly autonomous social organizations (Migdal, 1988:37). In this regard, “societies are not static formations but are constantly becoming as a result of these struggles over social control” (Migdal, 2001: 50).

Consequently, Migdal assumes a given power struggle among different social organizations. However, we do not know whether the state or society struggle for power. Instead, the power base determines the structure and the structure determines what the agents want and do. He develops an essentialist perspective and tries to presume to tell us what an agent thinks. While developing the “*State in Society*” approach, he assigns certain motivations to social organizations. For him, all social organizations seek dominance. One need only search international relations textbooks to see that mainstream international relations theories start their assumptions with certain motivations. For instance, realism argues that human nature is war-

like, or the main objective of states in the international system is survival. Yet, truly understanding agent motivations is problematic; it is impossible to read the minds or essential characteristics of these subjects. There is a problem of inaccessibility to agent motivations (inaccessibility does not necessarily mean inexistence). Even if we were able to do so, we would not know whether what we perceive is going to happen or not. There could be other factors limiting or directing the motivations and desires of these agents. However, what are privy to the formative, environmental conditions over agent motivations and actions. Emile Durkheim (*Le Suicide* 1897) for instance applied a structural explanation to committing a suicide. He argued that human motivations are to the larger extent determined by environmental conditions. Societal facts bear decisive and formative impacts on agent motivations and actions. It is impossible to know why people commit suicide. We will never know the agent's motivation. However, we can presume the structural conditions affecting the agent's motivations and behavior. Consequently, the motivations of social organizations in state-society relations are impossible to know. Yet, we can know the structural factors impacting their motives and actions.

Consequently, cultural, historical and political schools cannot find the most fundamental factor behind the lack of democratic orientation in the Middle East. The most fundamental factor lies in the distribution of material capabilities in state-society relations as argued in the following section.

### **Preliminary Argument**

State-society relations are vital in explaining the failure of democracy in the Middle East. This paper argues that the distribution of capabilities in the state society relations is the main factor shaping the regimes of the Middle Eastern states. State-society relations are not a *mélange* as suggested by Migdal; rather they are one dimensional running from state to society. In this relationship, the major contributing factor is the state's continuing and uncontrolled power over society. The centralized bureaucracies are too powerful when compared to the large portions of the societies. Even the rich classes lack independence from the control of the central state. Against strong and centralized bureaucracies there are no aristocracy and urbanized bourgeoisie class. Other than states, there are no autonomous actors in Middle Eastern societies. States are in control of every domain ranging from the economic to the cultural field. This is not only a

political problem, but a social one emerging from the distribution of material capabilities in these countries. This is the most fundamental cause for the lack of democratization in the Middle East since the state leaves no space for the emergence of other independent actors. In contrast to Joel Migdal's literature that contributes the absence of democratic orientation to a weak state and strong society, the argument here is that states are too strong (authoritarian) and societies too weak.

Historical political and social structure of Middle Eastern states goes back to the Ottoman times which for centuries were based on a specific power distribution. No other conscious and autonomous actor emerged in the society other than state. As Serif Mardin (1969: 264) argued, "the Ottoman Empire lacked that basic structural component that Hegel termed 'civil society', a part of society that could operate independently of central government and was based on property rights". The major obstacle behind that is the omnipotent state's control on economy. The state's control over economy together with patrimonial structure put society in ruler's mercy (Mardin, 1969: 260). Due to the patrimonial structure, the powerful state hindered the emergence of autonomous actors.

Social structure is the result of economic distribution. The structure of the economy in a country defines the social structure of that country. In other words, the distribution of capabilities is the main determinant of social and political life in a country. Accordingly, in the Middle East, the economic structure or rentier state, determines the social structure and state-society relations. And that economic structure determines the identities and interest of those actors in society including the states. The state allocates its economic sources. Tribal groups, religious organizations, and other social forces are hardly considered autonomous. As the definition of autonomy necessitates, there is a sharp distinction in power allocation between state and society. In sum, in contrast to the assertion of weak states and strong societies in the Middle East, the states are too strong and societies too weak. Middle Eastern societies lack capacity to act against the state's power. Without this capacity, there can no truly autonomous social organizations (Yalcin 2011). Skocpol (1979: 17) makes a similar argument, noting that "Revolutions are not made [rather] they come". Relatively speaking, while the intuitive preconditions for revolution (mass dissatisfaction) are common, successful revolutions are rare. Successful revolutions require the capacity to act. For example, the French revolution broke out while the greater population was relatively economically stable not while they were in the throes of terrible

economic conditions (Hobsbawn, 1962). French society possessed the capacity to act against the regime. The existing state-society relations in the Middle East put society at the mercy of the state. Middle Eastern societies lack the capacity to act against the state.

Middle Eastern societies have witnessed transformative developments; Nasser-Egypt 1952, Baath- Iraq 1958, Baath-Syria 1963, Sudan 1964, Kaddafi-Libya 1969. In the meantime, populist regimes took power in Tunisia (Bourguiba), Algeria (FIN), and Morocco (Mohammad V). New states launched intensive industrialization and modernization processes (state-led capitalism) and aimed to reinforce their control and legitimacy by instituting and expanding bureaucracy (Ayubi, 1990). In other words, they are state-run modernization, nationalization and programs run by state bureaucrats. This massive state-led capitalism penetrated into all segments of society and most urban classes and organizations became materially tied to the state and its patronage. As Iliya Harik (1992: 12) observed, most states enhanced their economic roles and remained the largest business corporation in their country. For instance, with the exception of Turkey, Lebanon and Morocco, trade unions in other states have heavily been regimented by the state (Kienle, 2011:151). Existing social and economic classes have been demolished via successive land reforms, with the development of a new urban class who owes their economic status and prestige to the state (Sullivan, 1992:27-28). While these ongoing economic and political developments in the region have enhanced the urban classes, tribal and other traditional social organizations have lost any social and political importance that they might have possessed (Kienle, 2011). In most countries, civil society organizations have had to deal with the various political and economic restrictions that have diminished their profound impact.

Middle Eastern societies' power is curtailed by the state because society is materially tied to the state. In Middle Eastern societies, oil revenues, the presence of strong and expanded militaries, the increasing number of state bureaucrats, weak political oppositions, and foreign military and financial support have increased the state's capabilities and strength over society (Abootalebi, 1998:8). The disproportionate growth in state capabilities has expanded the state's sphere of influence. The states, in the region, control socio-economic structure and create an economic class highly dependent on the state for employment, financing and protection. In fact, this dependency is one of the key perpetuating factors impacting state's power (Sivan, 1997). For instance, oil-rich monarchies societies are highly dependent on rentier-state economic policies

(Luciani, 1990). In other words, societies are not detached from the states. As Huntington (1991: 65) argued in “Third Wave Democratization”:

Oil revenues accrue to the state: they therefore increase the power of the state bureaucracy and, because they reduce or eliminate the need for taxation, they also reduce the need for the government to solicit the acquiescence of its subjects to taxation. The lower the level of taxation, the less reason for publics to demand representation; “no representation without taxation” is a political reality.

The rentier states with their centralized bureaucracy are too powerful compared to large portions of the society. In other words, oil-rich monarchies are not only big and centralized but are also policed and corrupt (Diamond, 1984:98). Apparently, these states are large, centralized and repressive. Therefore, civil society is weak and coopted. According to Abootalebi (1998), the existence of weak a society and a strong state poses the biggest obstacles to flourishing democracy in the region. In terms of state-society relations, there are no effective social groups and organizations to balance the state’s omnipotent power. In addition, the majority of people still remain uneducated and poor due to rapid modernization and industrial development. In other words, society remains weak and powerless unable to check the state’s power. In this regard, there is no autonomous civil society in the Middle East. Social control is not fragmented and the state dominance is omnipotent. States are too strong and societies are too weak. Therefore, an urbanized and individualized civil society fails to emerge.

### **Civil Society as an Autonomous Power**

Civil society, as a body or social organizations, is defined as an organization that is self-organizing and self-regulating autonomous from the state. It is regarded as one the most important factors facilitating democratic transition. It plays a vital role in influencing and shaping the political system (Gellner, 1994; Hall, 1995; Tester, 1992). In state-society relations distribution of material capabilities is given. No other determinants of state-society relations can exist by themselves. In this vein, to play a role of autonomous social organization as a balancer against state’s power requires certain material capability. This role is not just socially constructed but is materially gained. Without capacity to act there would be no independent civil society.

For civil society organizations to be agents of democratization there are several specific characteristics besides their autonomous structure: (1) operating democratically and respecting pluralism, (2) having issue-driven agendas with democratic political demands, and (3) gathering sufficient power (Kamrawa and Mora, 1998:895). With regard to Middle Eastern social organizations, these three additional characteristics together with the autonomous structure are hardly met. Tribal groups, religious organizations, traditional merchants and other social groups lack the capacity to place democratic demands on the state (Kamrawa and Mora, 1998:895-6). Regarding issue-driven structure, civil society organizations are inclined to come up with policies in response to a perceived functional breakdown of the state in particular areas. In the Middle East, most of the powerful social groups and organizations are curtailed by state authority. By definition, autonomy dictates that state and society possess a certain amount of power in comparison to one to another. As Kienle (2011: 146) stated, civil society organizations, in the Middle East, are materially dependent upon the political regimes and are affected by their strong autocratic features. In this regard, the states do not allow them to obtain autonomous power and to organize themselves. For instance, the rentier states of the Middle East continue extracting revenues and making promises to sustain their popular legitimacy. Most leaders in the region manipulate Islamic, nationalist and patrimonial premises to retain civil society groups. All in all, necessary conditions for flourishing and developing democratically inclined civil society organizations are absent in the Middle East. Civil society does not exist in any Arab country (Al-Sayyid, 1995: 140).

### **Syrian Civil Society**

Authoritarian regimes by their nature have been disinclined to tolerate the development of independent social and political organizations (civil society) to balance their powers. The authoritarian structure of Syrian regime for instance has been hostile towards the idea of independent and autonomous civil society. For example, political parties have always been one of the integral parts of civil society in modern politics. They provide open forums where people raise their demands and expectations from the political system. Until recently, according to the Syrian constitution, in particular the article 8 which regulated party system and made the

Baath party as head of state and society, formation of any political party was banned<sup>2</sup>. In February 26 2012 a new constitution was enacted and the controversial article 8 was dropped<sup>3</sup>. The monopoly that the Baath party has enjoyed for five decades ended. The main aim behind new constitution was to establish political pluralism. In this regard, opposition political parties and independent candidates were allowed to join general elections. However, the recently held parliamentary election in April 2012 indicated that no political party and independent candidates run for the elections<sup>4</sup>.

Historically during Hafez Al-Asad's presidency (1970-2000), the Syrian regime was as an authoritarian presidential system in the sense that political power was heavily centralized and the military and bureaucracy played crucial roles (Maoz, 1986; Seale, 1990; Hinnebusch, 1993; Perthes, 1995; Zisser 2001). The Syrian state after Hafez Al-Asad seized the power became more than an instrument of brute force. The Baathist regime institutions were institutionalized and the bureaucracy expanded. Corporatist structures of the state brought large parts of the society under the state's mercy. Simply stated, an authoritarian-bureaucratic state came into being (Perthes, 1995; 4). There was no space for pluralistic political and social competition in state-society relations. Therefore, civil society was oppressed and state exercised a high measure of control both by authoritarian and patrimonial means.

In fact as Raymond Hinnebusch (1993: 244) asserts, "historic imbalances obstructed a stable integration of state and civil society in Syria dating from at least the Ottoman period". The Ottoman rule hindered the emergence of an independent merchant class that might have reflected the cities demand such representation in political arena. The Ottoman state impeded a private land ownership until the nineteenth century while discouraging the emergence of land aristocracy. In other words, in terms of state-society relations, fragmented tribal structure was vital and the state discouraged the emergence of a land aristocracy (Anderson, 1974:372). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syria was mandated by France. During that period (1920-1946), the Ottoman structure was superseded by a semi-liberal structure. However, this structure failed to develop strong ties between state and civil society (Hinnebusch, 1993).

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria\\_constitution.htm](http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria_constitution.htm)

<sup>3</sup><http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/02/201222645055510841.html>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201257225944407493.html>

## The Baathist State

By wielding power through a military coup in 1963, the Baath regime sought to form an authoritarian-populist state by initiating strict corporatist channels. All opposition parties and socio-economic associations were repressed. Meanwhile, a massive economic nationalization which destroyed the economic bases of bourgeois class was launched. As Volker Perthes (1995: 3) stated:

With a government control over a substantial part of agricultural and industrial production and distribution, a rapidly growing public sector and public administration, and with public expenditure being the main determinant of the course of economic development, the state, so it seemed, had developed into an active interventionist and largely autonomous player, creating, rather than being dominated by, social forces and socio-economic relations.

The Baathist regime managed to strengthen the linkage in state-society relations through the array of corporatist associations. The regime formed popular organizations with the aim of incorporating peasants, women, students, youth and other social groups into Baath dominated compulsory, noncompetitive corporatist institutions which lacked autonomy (Moore and Salloukh, 2007: 65). For instance, the teachers union which included Syrian teachers from elementary schools to university professors was formed in late 1963 together with its branches throughout the country. Its leadership was appointed by the state. The Baath regime envisioned that giving a pivotal role to teachers would increase politicization of the young. Furthermore, on April 1980, certain number of professional associations and syndicates including the lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, and engineers were dissolved by the regime and their leaders were imprisoned<sup>5</sup> (Moore and Salloukh, 2007; George, 2003; Seale, 1989). Meanwhile, they were replaced with new leaderships appointed by the regime. Membership for them was compulsory.

The most decisive development for state-society relations after the Baathist's ascendancy to power in Syria was the implementation of land reform stipulating the elimination of the landlords' role between state and village (Hinnebusch, 1993; Perthes, 1995). In this regard, a

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<sup>5</sup> Approximately 100 doctors, 100 engineers, 50 lawyers, and 10 pharmacists were arrested.

large part of the landless proletariat became dependent upon the state and economic and social power of landlords was broken. In addition, by means of education and state-sponsored employment created an omnipotent state over the society. According to Hinnebusch (1993: 246), “this state sharply reduced societal autonomy and destroyed some social forces while creating and coopting others”. This is mainly because of the clientelistic structure of economic system. The economic and political structure never atomized civil society forces including merchants and industrialists. An important portion of civil society was threatened by distribution and redistribution of rapid modernization.

### **Bashar Al-Asad**

Bashar Al-Asad’s succession to presidency after his father death in 2000, there emerged prospects for substantial changes, *Damascus Spring*, among Syrian elites. Elites were mobilized around the demand for the termination of the emergency law, multiparty system and fair elections (George, 2003). New president’s profile as an ophthalmologist and a public figure led the elites to question the authoritarian structure of the state. Actually, several cautious advances were made to increase expectation toward Damascus Spring such as release of political prisoners. However, this reform movement did not last long because of established security concerns and the lack of autonomous and independent civil society. Many intellectuals persisted for the change but were sent to exiles and imprisoned. Eyal Zisser (2007: 77-98) called this period as “*A false spring in Damascus*”. It is false because this movement started by gatherings of small groups in private houses. A limited number of rich and intellectuals came together to discuss the need for change. It did not obtain grassroots support from the society.

Bashar Al-Asad’s goal when he took the power was to upgrade authoritarianism in Syria (Perthes, 2004; Hinnebusch, 2012). Similarly, Okar (2004) argued that, circumscribed political liberalization and manipulated elections persisted authoritarian structure in Syria. Authoritarian structure was a tool to conduct privatization while shifting public assets to network of privilege (Heydemann, 2004). In this way, Bashar Al Asad managed to reregulate state-society relations. The state remains too strong and the society too weak. There is no autonomous, independent, and bourgeoisie civil society to balance the state power.

Recent developments in the Middle East so-called “the Arab Spring” accelerated the discussion around prospects for democratic transitions in Syria. Based on the premise of this paper, the prospects for democratic transitions in the region are immature and amputated because in order for sustainable democracy to flourish, an independent and autonomous civil society is essentially required. The empowerment of civil society preponderantly lies in economic realm. Therefore, the distribution material capabilities between state and society shape the regimes of Middle Eastern state. Hinnebusch (1993: 256) argued that:

“The greater autonomy that incremental liberalization accords civil society will, however, revive the bourgeoisie, the force with the resources to construct a business-centered civil society. Having opted to depend on private capitalist investment, the regime will have to be responsive to bourgeois demands for greater rule of law and a general rollback of the boundaries of state power. Increased social autonomy is likely, in the long run, to generate stronger social forces that cannot readily be controlled except through wider power sharing.”

When Hosni Mubarak, the former leader of Egypt, was overthrown, hope for democratic regime was echoed by various people from politicians to a simple Facebook or twitter user. However, the Egyptian army has taken the power since thousands of people celebrated the regime change in Tahrir square. The state is still the largest employer and the number of social and political groups is limited. They are far too weak to balance the state’s power. In Syria since March 2011, the incidents in the major cities, Hama and Homs, have indicated that the state is too strong and the society too weak. The Syrian state by its military establishments and bureaucratic structure retains an uncontrolled power over the large portion of society. Accordingly, the recently held election in April 2012 has showed that no opposition candidate attended to the election and no seat was allocated for them in the parliament.<sup>6</sup> This election is the first multiparty election in five decades of the Syrian political history. In brief, the lack of an autonomous civil society is the most substantial predicament for flourishing of democratic regimes.

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201257225944407493.html>

## Conclusion

This paper tried to do three things. First it tried to assess Migdal's approach when evaluating the third world countries in particular the Middle East "State in Society". His idea that social and political organizations are mutually influencing each other was analyzed. According to this approach, society depicts a mélange of social organizations in which society is not structured dichotomously. Social control in society may be exercised by different groups heterogeneously in terms of their forms and rules. The power distribution of social control in society may be distributed among autonomous groups. Simply stated, the authority of social and political organizations may be fragmented. In this model, the state is only one of many organizations. Considering Migdal's approach and the Middle East, the states are too weak and societies are too strong. Second the paper tried to develop a counter argument to Migdal. It promoted the idea that the societies are too weak and the states are too strong in the Middle East. Third it tried to argue that the lack of autonomous civil society organization is the fundamental cause behind the lack of democracy in the region. States with their centralized bureaucracies are too powerful compared to the large portions of the societies. Corporatist structures of the states bring large parts of the society under the state's mercy.

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