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Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria

AUTHORITARIAN APPREHENSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

"I Know Very Well, yet Nevertheless . . ."

IDEOLOGY, INTERPELLATION, AND THE POLITICS OF DISAVOWAL

If the Arab uprisings initially seemed to herald the end of tyrannies and a move toward liberal democratic governments, their defeat not only marks a reversal but is of a piece with new forms of authoritarianism worldwide. Liberal democracy seems to be unmaking itself in the United States and parts of Europe, where we find civil rights being curtailed and forms of ultranationalist populism emerging with little regard for due process or freedom of the press. In Russia, the short-lived experiment with genuinely contested elections that took place in the context of rapacious capital extraction has been eclipsed by the emergence of a charismatic leader whose apparent popularity among a majority comes at the expense of any number of dissident minorities. If in the 1990s pundits hailed the "end of history" and political scientists promoted theories of democratic transition, in the early 2000s they shifted their attention to studies of authoritarian retrenchment. Of course, scholars searching hopefully for the necessary conditions of democratic consolidation—all too often framed inadequately in narrow terms of electoral contestation—have always been alert to issues of "backsliding," elite rivalries, undemocratic power-sharing, variations in economic development and growth, inequality, and the institutional fragilities produced by colonial legacies.[1] But the current moment is rightly generating reinvigorated interest in authoritarianism as such, bringing us new accounts of phony elections and party co-optation along with a nuanced concern with the design of coercive apparatuses.[2] Scholars are asking with renewed urgency why it is that citizens, and not only autocrats, so often seem to be attracted to autocracy.

This book is in part an effort to contribute to those debates by drawing from the Syrian context to rethink the political role and importance of ideology and of what Louis Althusser calls "ideological interpellation." It begins with the recalibration of authoritarian rule in Syria in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the death of president Hafiz al-Asad after a thirty-year regime (1970–2000) seemed to prepare the way under his son for a kinder, gentler version of autocracy. The initial paradox, when the uprising broke out in March 2011, lay in how activists easily presumed that the regime would live up to the image of civility it had been cultivating for a decade, thereby bringing into bold relief how potent the ideological apparatus was, even at the moment when it was most threatened. The peaceful protesters' early demands for dignity and political reform assumed that rights could be granted rather than seized, that the regime could be persuaded to make good on its own hype—and that calls for political "freedom" and a "civil state" would be overwhelmingly popular and therefore capable of enactment.

Although certainly inspired by demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya, the actual flash point for large-scale Syrian protest came with the brutal treatment of fifteen schoolchildren in the southern town of Darʿa, at the hands of security forces under the command of a close relative of the president.[3] Two women from Darʿa had been arrested in January, one of whom had allegedly been overheard discussing the likely overthrow of the Egyptian president Husni Mubarak on the phone, openly musing whether the Syrian regime would be next.[4] Prompted by the women's detention, a group of students ranging in age from ten to fifteen years and including the women's own children wrote anti-regime graffiti on the walls of a local school.[5] The regime arrested the students, turning the incident into a transformative moment, with residents responding by marching on the governor's mansion after Friday prayers and demanding the children's release.[6] Word then began circulating that the children were being tortured in detention. A week later, on March 18, security forces opened fire on a large crowd of protesters proceeding from Darʿa's main mosque after noon prayers, killing four. As the cycle of demonstrations and brutal crackdowns escalated, citizens from neighboring villages became engaged in the confrontation, until by March 25 solidarity protests had spread to Homs, Syria's third-largest city; the regime-identified coastal town of al-Ladhiqiyya (Lattakia); the notably pious area of Idlib; and drought-stricken al-Hasaka and Dayr al-Zur.[7] Later came mass protests in Syria's fourth-largest city, Hama, the primary site of the regime's war against Islamic opposition in the early 1980s, including the famous massacre of tens of thousands of residents, both political opponents and ordinary civilians, in 1982.

Outrage over disclosures that the children from Darʿa were being mistreated in prison, over the disrespect shown to elders attempting to negotiate their release, and over the sheer unaccountability of regime officials linked to the ruling family who were responsible for the children's treatment all tapped into a reservoir of dissatisfaction with authoritarian caprice, official corruption, ongoing brutality, and the government's inattentiveness to suffering. The slogan chanted by protesters—"With spirit, with blood, we sacrifice for you, ya Darʿa" (Bir-ruh, bid-dam, nafdiki ya Darʿa)—played on the regime's slogan of sacrifice for Syria's leader ("Bir-ruh, bid-dam, nafdika ya Bashshar"), substituting the tortured children for Bashar. This voicing of the national "we" in solidarity with the town where children had violated the norms of regime-sanctioned behavior made the abused students the focal point of new political intensities in which acts of collective citizenship coalesced around a determination to resist tyranny and disrupt the status quo.[8]

The regime's ability to adapt speaks to a broader set of ideological conditions related to political attachment. To be clear, I will not be arguing that ideology *caused* the Syrian regime to survive or that other factors were irrelevant to its success in doing so. The ability to limit army defections, exploit intra-elite rivalries, rely on devoted security forces and irregular troops, aggravate oppositional factions, galvanize business networks, and take advantage of regional divisions in order to court Iranian and Russian direct involvement all mattered. But the very fact of loyalty and pro-regime mobilization raises the question of what inclined people—and not simply the narrow group deriving obvious material benefit from the status quo—to stick to the kleptocracy they knew when the opportunity arose to (at least) entertain the idea of change. Fear was certainly part of the equation, but even fear must be made and remade, integrated into the warp and weft of everyday life, as we shall see. And fear did not deter everyone, for many others were in fact emboldened and enraged by the repression, often risking their lives and well-being to protest. Yet between fervent loyalists and political protesters resided a large population of ambivalent citizens—who might have made a difference in the uprising's tractive force had they tilted in its favor.[9]

Understanding this ambivalent middle is therefore key to our thinking about political outcomes, and, I submit, requires an updated account of how ideology intertwines with affect, in the context of war, to produce an atmosphere in which for many the exercise of creative political judgment becomes all but impossible. This atmosphere of epistemic and affective murk is politically efficacious, if not exactly optimal, for the regime. It is an atmosphere that continues to bear traces of neoliberal desires for the good life and its attendant forms of quiescence so central to Bashar al-Asad's first decade of rule (chapter 1). It is an atmosphere characterized by and reproduced through decades of ironic laughter (chapter 2) as well as new forms of media-inspired information overload—and the uncertainty about the truth itself that such conditions cultivate (chapter 3). Stipulating new and familiar forms of "as if" thinking, the regime produced guidelines for proper displays of mourning in wartime (chapter 4) and took advantage of circulating rumors to create fears of existential survival along sectarian lines (chapter 5). These factors in their interaction produced the seductive grounds for nonrebellion. They generated the ideological-affective mess that contributed to the remaking of Asad's political power—where atrocities by the Syrian regime found their revived conditions of possibility.

These circumstances also invited nonviolent, largely artistic challenges to the regime's aspirational control over image production. Puppetry lampooning the regime and, later, trenchant skits mimicking just about everybody (chapter 2), experiments in documentary reporting (chapter 3), and feature films countering authoritarian univocality with forays into what Hannah Arendt calls "representative thinking" (chapter 4) are all instances of daring to think otherwise. They lie not outside ideology but arise as critiques from within it. They are, in that sense, immanent—and therefore intimately aware of but estranged from contemporary circumstances in ways that tap into structural contradictions and devise means of bypassing or scaling the impasses of political life.

THE CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGY AS FORM

Old-fashioned Marxist notions about ideology emerging directly from class domination (expressed perhaps most prominently in *The German Ideology*) have been rightly superseded by more sophisticated analyses based on Marx's own discussion of commodity fetishism in *Capital*.[10] Drawing from Marx's account of the commodity form as the depository of labor, where labor is expressed in "value" and is thereby rendered abstract through social processes of exchange, some scholars have discarded the concept of ideology altogether in favor of analyses of form and fetishism.[11] Others such as Slavoj Žižek suggest a repurposing of the concept, inviting an understanding of ideology as homologous to Freud's "dream work." Instead of privileging explicit or latent content, ideology in this view is best understood in terms of its formal properties and function,[12] one of whose effects, as the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has taught us, is to *contain* political contradictions and conflict.[13] And containment works through various practices of seduction, not all of them intentional or deliberate, as well as through mechanisms of incitement that channel affective energies and shape judgments. Ideology operates to manage desire in social rather than individual terms, so that repression and wish fulfillment operate together in what Jameson aptly describes as a "kind of psychic compromise or horse-trading, which strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest."[14]

Pace the Weberian understanding of ideology as a discrete doctrine, ethos, or worldview, ideology conceived in this way as form, entailing specific mechanisms of incitement and containment, is itself structuring. Within it are occasioned all the psychic, embodied, and imaginative processes that go into people's social and political experiences.[15] Žižek and Jameson here share the virtue of not falling into the trap of "false consciousness," for there is no such thing as a true consciousness to be held up against the false one as its definitive and salutary alternative. There is no social reality without illusion, fantasies, and their modes of mediation.[16] Instead, ideology renders abstract political anxieties and fantasies livable by exciting and managing them—sometimes through displacement (as we shall see especially in the discussion of sectarianism in chapter 5) and sometimes by filling in gaps and smoothing over what would otherwise be nagging and perhaps unsustainable inconsistencies (in ways that appear in various places throughout the book).[17] In this sense, ideology does more than offer a theorization of risk, interest, and pleasure; it organizes these concepts or is already presupposed in them. Far from existing outside calculation and desire, ideology structures how we go about calculating and desiring.

Of course, as Jean Comaroff points out, anthropologists and cultural Marxists have long used terms such as *value*, *habitus*, *discourse*, or *hegemony* in their attempts to capture such "dimensions of psychic colonization."[18] I prefer *ideology* if only because the term's own theoretical genealogy signals the incoherent, differentiated, ambivalent, and contradictory ways in which people are not so much colonized by ideology as drawn affectively and cognitively into the workings of multiple lifeworlds in ways it makes sense to call ideological. The term names an ensemble of practices being undertaken by people at any given time—such as speaking, listening, feeling, emoting, believing, lying about believing (and/or not believing they're lying)—sufficiently in concert and with sufficient specificity to be affixed with a label. And discrete labels (like *neoliberal* or *liberal* or *communist* or *capitalist* or *Christian* or whatever) give the impression of doctrinal coherence, simultaneously presupposing and putting on offer a sense of political membership. As Terry Eagleton has noted, the concept's capaciousness is both its weakness and its strength, indexing difficulties that give us traction on the critical theoretical questions raised under its rubric: why people submit to their subjection; why some practices of address are more resonant than others; how both addresses and responses by addressees vacillate between the propositional and the affective; how desires get mediated and social realities stabilized; how states of ambivalence that are consequential for political action can be generated by conflicts between desire and attachment; how ideology operates as political mediation to orient citizens, specifying the terms of collective membership and the standards for judgment.[19]

Already implicit in this discussion of ideology is the understanding that the question of credibility in such an account is complicated. The complications come in part because it is hard to know whether someone "really" believes something, as noted by both Timur Kuran, the game theorist who coined the term *preference falsification* (1995), and the anthropologist William Mazzarella in his essay on "totalitarian tears" in North Korea (2015).[20] In fact, it seems easier ethnographically to capture blatant examples of unbelief, instances of dissimulation in which subjects act *as if* they believe, as my book *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999) demonstrated.[21] For Žižek, neither belief nor ideology refers to "an 'intimate,' purely

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mental state." Rather (following Althusser), both imply ritualized practices, habits, and thoughts that are "*materialized* in our effective social activity"[22]—an approach this book embraces. Social activity includes failures to act as well as failed action, instances of unbelief and of error, acts of resistance, and dissonances that do not get smoothed out, which then, in Žižek's crucial insight, offer not only possibilities for the initiation of a new world but also the positive conditions for reasserting the perpetuation of the old.[23] As we shall see in the case of Syria, ambivalence can be viewed fruitfully as one such instance of non- or partial integration, a product of ideology reproductive, albeit imperfectly and with slippage, of the social order. The very fact of incoherence within ideology, moreover, allows for political wiggle room while at the same time requiring the (impossible) imaginative work of making things add up.[24] Ideology's "function" as structuring reality is itself generative of further tensions, incoherencies, contradictions, and instances of uneven saturation—all the complexities and intensities that presuppose the political smoothing work needed for reproduction to continue.

Recognizing that these conflicts or dissonances exist both inter- and intrapersonally does not mean that anyone is required to act on, acknowledge, or embrace them. Instead, one hallmark of ideological uptake is the disavowal expressed in the famous line "I know very well, yet nevertheless . . ."[25] In Syria, as we shall be seeing in greater detail throughout the book, this logic of disavowal has worked in myriad ways: I know very well that the regime is systemically corrupt, yet nevertheless I act as if it will reform itself; I know very well that there is no return to the way things were, yet nevertheless let's act as if things can return to the way they were; I know very well that the opposition is hopeless, yet nevertheless let's act as if the opposition will make things right; I know very well that the commodity form takes a social relation among human beings and makes it into a relation among things, yet nevertheless I shall act as if the commodity form were a simple relation among things. The *as if* here is not the one of public dissimulation so crucial to my analysis in *Ambiguities of Domination*, but speaks instead to fundamental fantasy investments like the desire for an unattainable coherence or for an economic prosperity that comes at no one's expense.

The political implications of this difference are profound: even though we know better or are educable, our fundamental investments (in, say, comfort or order or the hope that change can happen effortlessly) prove resistant to ideology critique. Thus, we can "know very well" that a proposition is false or unjust or contingent *yet nevertheless* continue to act as if we believe in it because, at some level, we are still supported by fundamental fantasy investments in the very practices we nevertheless consciously want to repudiate.[26] Our underlying attachments, to express this in a slightly different theoretical register, can be in tension with our conscious desires and the propositional statements that communicate those desires to others. And this tension is what I am indexing as ambivalence, a situation in which the toggle between the attachment to order and the desire for change, for example, results (as it did among key populations in Syria) in the paralysis of political commitment, in the polarization of opinions and the gravitation toward existing comfort zones in some cases, and in a suspension of judgment in others (as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4).

To recap: *ideology* refers to a set of embodied, affectively laden discourses often conveyed acephalously through everyday practices. Understood not simply as content but also as form, ideology has identifiable structuring effects, the nature and function of which are to contain conflict and smooth out complexities that might otherwise make life unlivable. Undergirded by fantasy investments that prove sticky even in the face of knowing better, ideology structures a politics of "as if" that goes beyond enforced public dissimulation. More important than feigned belief or demonstrations of outward obedience—as critical as they may be for political compliance—are the common ways ideology's impact is reflected in and generated anew through ordinary moments of disavowal, in the "I know very well, yet nevertheless . . ." rationalizations that allow us to participate in and uphold existing orders. Accounting for ideology, moreover, will help us explore the seductions of status quo conventionality in the face of challenges to it (chapter 1); the varied work comedy does (chapter 2); the role "fake news" plays in unmooring political judgments from their frames of reference (chapter 3); the possibilities for appropriating the affective intensities around mourning (chapter 4); and the ongoing operations of sectarian Othering (chapter 5).

UPTAKE

Reviving the concept of ideology requires acknowledging the complexities of ideological address, some of which were famously theorized by Louis Althusser in his landmark essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971). There he stages what has become an iconic scene in which a policeman calls out, "Hey, you there!" prompting a passerby to turn around, having recognized herself to be the one hailed by the call.[27] For Althusser, it is in this event of "interpellation"—this reciprocal recognition on the part of the policeman and the passerby—that the passerby becomes a "subject," someone subjugated to and the subject of political power. One familiar way to look at ideological interpellation is as a form of ritual affirmation, a set of discursive practices that with varying degrees of resonance secure and reproduce routine attachments.[28] The eventful moment in the allegory, from this point of view, is the retroactive fantasy produced by the ritualized behavior, which does *not* require that the individual undergoing subject formation believe in or credit such subjecthood in any particular way (although she may), but only that she enter into the routine or behave as if she inhabits a world in which that subjectivity is the one it makes sense to adopt.

Examples of interpellation as ritual affirmation are everywhere in our ordinary lives—in practices of citizenship like singing the national anthem (or enduring its being sung) at a sporting event, or signing a protest petition, or affixing a postage stamp featuring the nation's flag onto an envelope. The poster of Uncle Sam pointing at passersby and declaring "I want you"—that is, me, the anonymous citizen, the presumed spectator—to join the army offers a particularly succinct example of political interpellation in the US context. The pacifist's revulsion upon encountering such a poster, moreover, does not save her from being interpellated into the world of American patriotism, for it is through her very repugnance that she is being made into a peace-loving subject. Subjects in market economies are constantly being interpellated as consumers as well, in the drumbeat of advertising celebrating status distinctions, for example, or in succumbing to the allure of looking like a fashion model, without believing that any such transformation could or even should take place. Or, to take an overtly political example from Syria of the 1980s–90s: shopkeepers often rolled their eyes even while readily relenting to post the president's picture in their windows. And, as we shall see in chapter 1, as the regime initiated neoliberal reforms in 2005,

market inducements became increasingly relevant to reproducing the political status quo—which for the well situated remains the case all the way through to the present.

A second feature of the allegory, as is clear from these same examples, is that interpellation presumes a degree of reciprocity between the two agents, in that the passerby must not only be called out by the policeman but also turn around in acknowledgment of having been hailed. This is a point that has occupied many commentators, among them Judith Butler, Mladen Dolar, Michel Pêcheux, and Slavoj Žižek. And for these theorists, the passerby's response to the address entails a *necessary* misrecognition, premised on what Žižek, citing Pêcheux, points to as an illusory prior "I was already there," a short circuit whose effects can be comical: "No wonder you were interpellated as a proletarian, when you are a proletarian."[29] In other words, there seems to be presumed in Althusser's formulation some unelaborated prior coordination, what Butler in an effort to specify the source of this addressability calls a "doctrine of conscience,"[30] explaining the seemingly precocious receptivity on the part of the subject-in-formation to the subject-forming hail. As Butler puts it, it is not simply that much can go wrong in the story, but that "the grammar of that narrative presupposes that there is no subjection without a subject who undergoes it."[31] Althusser's allegory thus seems to stumble on a temporal impossibility, in which the addressee is already presumed to have been constituted as a subject before the hail that constitutes the subject—for otherwise how could she have recognized herself in the moment of interpellation? Empirically oriented social scientists might respond that Althusser needs an account of socialization. But theoretically, the temporal impossibility is itself revealing of a tension in everyday life. For in relation to an ideological demand, we often operate without a specific originary moment. Ideological interpellation is, rather, secured through iterable linguistic conventions or language games (such as, for Butler, the conscience-stimulating reprimand implicit in the allegory[32]), which are observable independent of any identifiable initiating moment.

These two points tell us that ideology operates as a set of repetitive, sociopolitical interactions. But I want to argue that there is a third, little noticed but crucial dimension of interpellation, which came to the fore during my fieldwork: for interpellation to be complete, the issuer of the hail must also recognize the responder's recognition of it.[33] Subject formation, in the sense of becoming a jaywalker in the context of the police officer's "hey you" or a proletarian (or a consumer) in the context of capitalism or, returning to Syria, a citizen in the context of neoliberal autocracy, depends not only on people signing up for the system but also on the authority's response (or nonresponse) to the people signing up. In other words, the uptake of ideology (in this sense of the consummated exchange between the hailer and the hailed) is secured differentially—not simply because people are variously liable to recognize themselves as different kinds of hailed subjects (implying a kind of "coming alive" of individuals in the law) but also in the lawgiver's recognition of the citizen's response, which is critical to how the contours of inclusion and exclusion are drawn.

In the years leading up to the uprising, this third dynamic was frequently in evidence in the obvious unease some Syrians were made to feel when they did not fully live up to the regime's brand of modern commodified competence. Scenes like the following, in which worlds collided, became typical. A nuclear family of seven dressed in conservative clothing comes to town from the outskirts of Damascus to have pizza or ice cream at the Café Roma, an upscale establishment in the prosperous Malki district. Money as such is not an issue. But styles of comportment are.[34] In these settings, dress, bearing, dialect differences, and even the pronunciation of certain words invite invidious distinctions between citizens coded as "country bumpkins" (despite their newly acquired wealth) and the embodied dispositions or "habitus" of the regime's upwardly mobile professional managerial elite. The disdain was palpable in public places where people of different background conditions were brought together—the snickers of contempt audible, the comments on smells and styles of comportment part and parcel of a grappling with new forms of commercialized living. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, those who "presume to join the group . . . without being the product of the same social conditions, are trapped whatever they do, in a choice between anxious hyper-identification and the negativity which admits its defeat in its very revolt."[35]

Bourdieu describes working-class aspirations and aristocratic forms of "cultural capital" in Europe. By contrast, the image-making strategies opted for in the Syrian case combined a globally recognizable imprimatur of name-brand chic with a longtime, largely Sunni-bourgeois sense of urbane decorum, compensating for the regime's parvenu origins in the hinterland. The theoretical point is nevertheless the same: the collusion between regime and market in Syria produced a set of mechanisms for inviting and signaling membership, disseminating the standards through which alternative choices for everyday existence (such as conservative clothing, intensified practices of piety, and large family size) were deemed inferior. And this judgment—registered in the 2000s in the dissemination and enforcement of the new official aesthetic as opposed to the party pamphlets of old—operated, as the allegory of interpellation suggests, to dismiss, ignore, or disparage other ways of being in the world. What makes scenes like the one at Café Roma so cringeworthy and typical is their occurrence in the face of such efforts at hyperidentification. Adopted by the ruling family and purveyed through sanctioned glossy magazines, global PR firms, lifestyle-oriented radio and television programs, and local billboards, these signaling mechanisms exemplified the convenient alliance between neoliberal capital and autocracy. As we shall see in chapter 1, those whose styles of comportment, affective registers, and ordinary embodied habits chafed against the newer, glitzier, regime-oriented ones generated spaces for conflict, occasioned resentment, and ultimately created populations rife with dissatisfaction. Practices of rejection, including microprocesses signaling disdain and disrespect—being coded as backward—diminished what otherwise might have been earnest if sometimes embarrassed pursuits of inclusion into the existing system. As scholars of social movements and of civil war grievance note, it is not these conditions in and of themselves that cause change. But they do describe sites of disaffection disposed toward some degree of activism—often independent of parameters such as wealth or simple economic well-being. In Syria these scenes of encounter suggest the background conditions for what became a clarion call for dignity (*karama*; *karameh*), a political-ethical claim both castigating the regime (*nizam*) for its moral and material corruption (*fasad*) and demanding recognition (*iʿtiraf*) of humans' noninstrumental, intrinsic worth.[36]

MOVING FORWARD

Like most of my work, this book tacks back and forth between theory and ethnographic evidence—the latter derived in this case from fieldwork conducted in Syria in 2010 and 2011, then in France, Germany, Lebanon, Turkey, and the United States as so many of my Syrian interlocutors were forced into emigra-

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Neoliberal Autocracy and Its Unmaking

Touted by its publishers as the "most prestigious lifestyle and luxury magazine in Syria,"[1] the English-language monthly *Happynings* enjoined readers of its January 2011 issue to accessorize with camouflage: "From combat cool to aviatrix chic, military style took the fall runways by storm. We show how to pledge allegiance to the season's hottest trend and work army accents into every look."[2] A music video by Husayn al-Dik, the brother of a regionally famous crooner, echoed this aesthetic imperative in Arabic, backed by performers dressed in black-and-gray fatigues, matching hats, and lace-up boots dancing to his sexually suggestive tune "Natir Bint al-Madarseh" (Waiting for the Schoolgirl).[3]

At odds with the ascetic, austere, tanks-in-the-streets reality of the 1980s, the image of military apparel shifting from a sign of autocratic control to an accoutrement of consumer choice proved ephemeral, undermined by the reappearance of soldiers in the streets when protests got underway in mid-March. As demonstrations gained momentum and the regime responded by attempting to crush dissent, the public prominence of consumer preoccupations with lifestyle and luxury gave way to anxieties about conspiracy and disorder—at least among Syrian supporters of president Bashar al-Asad's regime. For others dreaming of an end to authoritarian rule or worrying more about crop failure or lax morals than what to wear to the party, the return of the military to the streets laid bare the unvarnished essence of autocracy—its reliance on coercive power to squelch unrest. As the situation worsened, the glamour and glitz of Bashar al-Asad's first decade could no longer obscure the regime's violence or its evident refusal to respond to protest demands with anything more than empty promises. Yet among Syrians, the regime's marked willingness to destroy perceived threats to its survival was not met with anything near uniform condemnation. Particularly notable for our purposes is the apparent oddity that even as demonstrations mushroomed in various parts of the country, in Syria's two major cities, Aleppo (its largest city and key commercial hub) and Damascus (its capital), the population failed to mobilize in significant numbers.[4] The question posed by this chapter is, Why? Considered against the backdrop of the war's horror, the question of initial participation in protests may seem a remote one. But to move toward a precise understanding of the limits of the rebellion and the seductions of status quo conventionality, it helps to see how the Syrian regime managed to produce a silent majority of citizens invested in stability and fearful of alternatives.

I argue that what might best be described, following Lauren Berlant, as an ideology of the good life operated among key metropolitan populations to organize desire and quell dissent.[5] Syria's good life entailed not only the usual aspirations to economic well-being, but also fantasies of multicultural accommodation and a secure, sovereign, pride-inducing national identity.[6] It is these visions and inducements to compliance in the first decade of president Bashar al-Asad's rule, unevenly saturating and in flux, which defined the terms in which neoliberal autocracy was created, sustained, and, in the context of the uprising, ultimately reconfigured.[7]

Neoliberal autocracy implies two contradictory *logics* of rule: the one cultivating desires for market freedom, upward mobility, and consumer pleasure, and the other tethering advancement opportunities to citizen obedience and coercive regulation.[8] This contradiction was mediated and managed in pre-uprising Syria in part through a local image world that wedded private capital to regime control in a way officially epitomized by the seemingly glamorous, urbane, and assertively modern "first family." A first-family mimesis worked to produce the celebrity president, his elegant, English-speaking first lady, Asma', and their young children as sites of an aspirational consciousness imbued with individual responsibility, refined taste, fashionable possessions, and domestic intimacy.[9] In this first decade of the 2000s, fantasies of upward mobility became tied to acts of personal initiative and a commitment to the status quo, replacing the quasi-socialist promises of state-initiated development or party cadre activism of the previous Asad regime (1970–2000) with a classier, "upgraded" autocracy.[10] By 2011, in the context of the region's growing unrest, we see the regime revamping its modes of ideological interpellation in service of a doubling down on the connection between the continuation of this good life and autocratic survival.

The chapter begins in part 1 by investigating neoliberal autocracy's forms of ideological address, chronicling the regime's success in the younger Asad's first decade of rule in producing this image of an enlightened, more benevolent dictatorship under the paradoxical sign of market freedom. Part 2 explores the onset of the uprising in some ethnographic detail, along with the broader discursive conditions that helped structure forms of *both* reticence *and* political participation characteristic of the first year of unrest. Neoliberal autocracy—built on the contradiction between promised freedoms and ongoing coercion while focusing the diffuse desires of Syrians onto centrally managed celebrity—began to unravel. As it happened, the system came undone in the absence of alternatives outfitted with the necessary programmatic vision and organizational wherewithal to mount a decisive challenge. Part 3 complicates the convenient but inaccurate picture, popular among scholars and journalists, of the uprising as largely a product of class conflict.[11] Anticipating objections to my focus on ideology, this section insists on ideology's coimplication with issues of political economy, fear, sectarian difference, and generational conflict—marshalling both ethnographic and quantitative evidence to suggest that areas of protest and quiescence do not map at all neatly onto regions of relative deprivation and plenitude. The chapter's overall exploration of ideology's importance and its production of ambivalence—the specific contexts of neoliberalism, authoritarian rule, and their combined formation in experiences of neoliberal autocracy—requires a few clarifications, to which I now turn.

A NOTE ON AMBIVALENCE IN POLITICS

Scholars of the Left correctly note that neoliberalism produces "zones of social abandonment"[12] and disaffection, as safety nets disappear or are revamped in the context of growing inequality and the availability of perquisites like luxury goods. My intervention, in contrast, aims to explore the power of neoliberalism to seduce even those who recognize and condemn its injustices. For neoliberalism has also organized new forms of sociability, affective connection, optimism, and pleasure—explaining how and why neoliberalism generated the forms of ambivalence that helped sustain authoritarianism in the face

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of serious challenges to it.

Syrians with ambivalent positions on the uprising were widely referred to as the "gray people" (*al-ramadiyyin*), and unsurprisingly, they came in various shades. Some were coded by activists as *mutaz-abzib* (vacillators), people who swing back and forth between "wanting and not wanting change."[13] Their self-definition as ambivalent onlookers was symptomatic of neoliberal autocracy's success. Opposition activists dismissed this version of ambivalence from the start, calling the onlookers "opportunists" (*in-tihaziyyin*) who "every hour had a new opinion" (*kull sa'a bira'y*), who could not "commit to a point of view" (*ma 'andu mawqif*) or failed "to stabilize their position" (*ma yathbut 'ala ra'y*). And the number of citizens roughly fitting those descriptions put systemic limits on the uprising and constituted an ideological victory for the regime. Syrians self-describing as "moderates" (*mu'atadilin*, connoting equilibrium or balance) were another shade of gray. Early in the uprising they found themselves being lambasted by opposition activists but tolerated by the regime, with some even recognized as part of an "honorable opposition" (*al-mu'arada al-sharifa*). The characteristic disavowal among this group runs something like this: "I know very well that the regime will insist on holding on to its political power, yet nevertheless I'll act as if it won't"; or "Nevertheless, I'll act as if a civil state is possible within its confines." And finally, regular riders on the microbuses were heard declaring their indifference to what was happening, saying it didn't involve them (*mani 'alaqa*).[14]

Represented among these three varieties of ambivalence were two distinct demographics. One set comprised those fortunate enough to be already accustomed to the pleasures brought by new types of prosperity, sociability, and consumerism. Their communities formed the worlds of downtown Damascus and Aleppo, or what advertisers (expanding their thinking beyond strictly economic categories to practices of taste and distinction) rated the "A+, A, and A−" neighborhoods of the two cities.[15] The rest, if more in aspirational mode, were able to imagine at least a modicum of such luxury for themselves. For these, the payoff while unrealized remained a payoff. It was visible in the environment and palpable, worth waiting and working for. In the early days, these two populations were noticeably absent from the protests, evidently preferring quiescence to venturing into the uncharted territory of political resistance. So long as these ambivalent populations continued not signing up for the uprising, the regime had a much easier time responding to pockets of peaceful resistance by deploying scorched-earth tactics.

And this brings us to my invocation of "the good life." Despite its roots in Aristotelian ethics, usage (outside social theory) tends toward the trivial these days, as in a synonym for "consumer pleasures" or as a meme in the pep rally version of American political values. To be sure, neophyte consuming subjects may be expected to act accordingly, but I have more at stake in deploying the notion—both theoretically and in relation to Syrian specifics. Part of what I have in mind is similar to what Jean Comaroff notes of advanced capital in its globally varied neoliberal forms in describing the "powerful fetishisms at work that relate not merely to commodities as consumable goods, but the commodity (and the whole structural order that secures it) as a hieroglyph of profound understandings of value, power, truth, and world-making."[16] These fetishisms are potent in their effects, reshaping in economized terms people's very understandings of and engagements in contemporary life. Itself reshaped by corporate forms of capital, the regime had become a quasi-clan-based corporation, fostering affinities between the idea of market opportunities and political conformity that are familiar from nominally democratic regimes as well. Such major or minor opportunism constituted a degree of outright support for the regime, but perhaps more important, it went along with enough political ambivalence to keep large-scale peaceful protest from developing in the two major cities.

In other parts of Syria (such as "first-mover" areas like Homs, Dar'a, Hama, and Idlib), any number of alternative commitments—ranging from styles of family upbringing to attendance at mosque-based study groups or ties to the Communist Party—provided a basis for a potential challenge to the regime's ethical, political, and aesthetic valences.[17] At the same time, regional particularities even within a province are considerable. Mohammed Jamal Barout tells us that so many police officers come from Idlib governorate that when a male baby is born, people exclaim, "It's a policeman!" Yet other areas of the same province are known for their Islamic anti-regime activism. And still other regions of Idlib, in the context of the uprising, became famous for their humor, such as Kafranbel with its inventive caricatures lampooning the regime, or for their well-known affiliation with anti-Ba'thist leftist parties. Explaining these variations in detail will ultimately require significantly more fine-grained sociological research and attention to regional specificity than this study allows. That work is already underway, with scholars beginning to grapple with such problems as gathering statistical evidence based on counting protests or having to rely on regime economic data. Barout has been especially attentive to the differences, similarities, and interdependences between the "Damascus metropole" and areas on the periphery of the city, or Rif Dimashq, showing that places belonging administratively to the periphery can be economically and socially very much a part of the city,[18] while the dynamics found elsewhere in the periphery can differ from both Damascus center and other parts of the periphery.[19] Kevin Mazur's work provides another example of important research underway. One of his findings is that the relatively few protest-related deaths that did occur in central Damascus were in areas resembling ones from the rural hinterland.[20] Scholars such as these, and others, like Kheder Khaddour,[21] are generating extraordinarily rich accounts of regional variations, with implications for why people were willing to rebel—when they were.[22]

It remains the case, however, that no one as yet has accounted compellingly for why the uprising erupted in some places and not in others, or why it became violent in some places with recent histories of violence but not in others (at least at the onset). My own view, stepping back a bit, is that the areas that did revolt would not have risen up had Egypt and Libya, the two authoritarian examples with which Syrians of various stripes most vocally identified, not witnessed massive protests previously. The regime's neoliberal autocracy was sufficiently possessed of efficacious compliance inducements to forfend rebellion had there not been regional demonstration effects. Given the uprisings elsewhere, however, my own argument would require that any answer to the variation question consider the salience of attachments to the good life and the complex relationships between ideological addressors and addressees, rather than reducing the analysis to statistically visible indications of, say, affluence. Citizens were similarly hailed but recognized differentially by the regime, whose hold on power was maintained by way of the production of neoliberal lifeways through autocratic means. Neoliberal autocracy required hiding those mechanisms in plain sight, both exciting aspirations for initiative and limiting their political potential. While this chapter is more about Damascus's and Aleppo's quiescence than that of the country as a

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whole, my general argument should encourage scholars to consider not only conditions of plenitude and deprivation but also citizens' fantasy investments. Attending to the coimplication of ideology and material practices allows us to see expectations shifting in the context of neoliberal autocracy. Citizens were differentially interpellated—unevenly addressed by the regime's seductive images of economic prosperity, discourses of freedom, and empowerment, and by varied experiences of migration.

As a point of clarificatory insistence: I do try to debunk existing explanations that reduce protests to economic grievances, but my immediate objective is *not* to explain the reasons for the uprising. Rather, to reiterate, I want to understand the importance of ambivalence in sustaining neoliberal autocracy despite major challenges to it. From the point of view of studying ideology's potency, understanding why people refrain from action is as important as explaining their participation.[23] By shedding light on the enticements of neoliberal autocracy in Syria, this chapter offers lessons both for students of comparative politics and for social and political theorists, showcasing fantasies of order and prosperity that are evident (in varying flavors and degrees) in other neoliberal autocratic countries as well.

In short, my focus on the neoliberalism part of neoliberal autocracy in this chapter designates an especially seductive, particularly insinuating, and largely implicit endorsement of market-mediated experiences such as those associated with risk and pleasure. As a particular ideological formation, neoliberalism is saturating without being fully naturalized, organizing lifeworlds in ways that can also structure dissent. Autocracy, despite its cruelties and caprice, offers the promise of order, a way of blanketing over or managing what might be made into incendiary differences (like sectarian affiliation or pious extremism). Neoliberal autocracy, then, delimits a diffusely bounded comfort zone in which staying safe seems possible and consumer aspiration desirable, on the condition that citizens harbor no dreams of even superficial political transformation. By analyzing the 2011–12 period, this chapter brings to the fore a concern that animates the entire book: the spectrum of affective dynamics by which support persists at the same time that ambivalence matters, and resistance—even repugnance—gets organized.

One final caveat: I use the term *neoliberalism* despite its problems, some of which I have pointed out elsewhere. The concept indexes at least four distinct political economy processes: (1) macroeconomic stabilization (via "austerity policies" encouraging low inflation and low public debt, and discouraging Keynesian countercyclical policies); (2) trade liberalization and financial deregulation; (3) the privatization of publicly owned assets and firms; and (4) welfare state retrenchment.[24] Sometimes these four processes work in concert, but often they do not, and their impact on population welfare varies from place to place.[25] Moreover, scholars have captured important variations not only between countries but also within them.[26] In Syria, many citizens never fully abandoned moral commitments or a sense of entitlement to some version of the welfare state, while differing sectors of the economy proved either more vulnerable than others to market competition or better able to exploit new opportunities for regime-business collusion.[27]

Too exclusive a focus on divergences among neoliberal regimes, however, forecloses what can be a fruitful consideration of the neoliberal order as a distinct ideological project, one with the specific capacity to suture together vastly different political-economic situations by enlisting citizen subjects into novel modes of regulation, intervention, and protest, all of which goes on in service of what Michel Foucault calls "the general art of government."[28] In this sense, "neoliberal" ideology refers to how everyday practices, scholarly works, official policies, and countless other characterizing instantiations invoke the language of efficiency, consumer choice, conspicuous consumption, cost-benefit calculations, and personal initiative in ways that "mark a shift in risk-bearing" away from governments and corporations and onto individuals and families.[29] By 2011, neoliberalism as a bundle of global, epochal phenomena had come to suffuse everyday life, "powerfully creat[ing]," to borrow Jean Comaroff's words, "the nature of late modern ontology—both in its explicitly discursive registers (in economic theory, human capital talk, casino idioms, etc.) and in the lived ontology of fetishism."[30]

PART ONE: THE MAKING OF NEOLIBERAL AUTOCRACY

Although authoritarian rule in Syria was long-standing and its stabilizing effects entrenched by the late 1980s, its neoliberal variant began gradually to emerge in the 1990s with "selective" economic reforms, followed by ambitious privatization initiatives culminating in the official adoption in 2005 of what was euphemistically termed a "social market economy."[31] Devised by an emerging professional managerial elite, sounding like the International Monetary Fund with its language of "good governance" and "stakeholders," this social market economy involved encouraging private sector investment, stressing the virtues of individual philanthropy, and making provisions for offloading risk and responsibility onto "civil society."[32] Cultivating private sector investment and celebrating the merits of private welfare, moreover, made for growing elective affinities between Syria's *ʿulama* (clergy), with its historical roots in the country's urban notable classes, and regime-oriented crony capitalists. The regime's turn toward the private sector by the 2000s helps explain the clergy's divergent and fractured responses to the uprising—and the relative quiescence of key religious leaders in both Damascus and historically rebellious Aleppo.[33]

In Syria in the 2000s, circles of privilege expanded and contracted at the same time, resulting in countervailing tendencies that congealed some differences—the gap between rich and poor widened, with more people appearing more prosperous in both major cities—while producing new bases for inclusion.[34] Access to information technologies, increased possibilities for travel, an expanding circle of financial and social networks reflected in the first family's exemplification of cosmopolitan living, and a growing familiarity with urbane tastes (if not necessarily the means to indulge them)—such quotidian novelties constituted an important shift from Hafiz al-Asad to Bashar. Introducing some measure of economic reform and playing catch-up with global trends in the glossies were only part of what changed. The professional managerial elite broadened to include global advertising's local subsidiaries and members of Syria's regionally successful and celebrity-conscious drama community. The latter, as we shall see, could be called on to produce messages extolling a modernity that performed—both on and off the screen—a version of the good life consonant with the one being exemplified by the regime.

The centerpiece in this celebration of first-family sophistication and urbanity, and perhaps the signal example of amped-up public relations campaigns in the decade preceding the uprising, was the vigorous effort to market the president and first lady as members of the moral neoliberal class—at once role models with whom to identify, exemplars to aspire to, and patrons to submit to—part of a growing cosmopolitan political elite that could represent a palatable privatization of the public sector. By disartic-

ulating regime from state, the ideal of the moral neoliberal ruling couple provided a new basis for public dissimulation—for an acting *as if* the glamorous neoliberal autocratic regime was not personalistic, patronage-based, kleptocratic, and violent; for acting *as if* its lip service to individual voluntarism and civic empowerment could actually offer a civil, moral solution to the problems of governance that the corrupt, tired, crude, overtly brutal developmentalist party state of old did not.[35]

The first family's forays into consumption-oriented, morally laden image management began in 2000 with Bashar al-Asad's marriage to first lady Asma', but really got underway in 2008 with her heralded appearance in the weekly newsmagazine *Paris Match* and UNESCO's designation of Damascus as the "cultural capital" of the Arab world.[36] Three years later, the portrayal of the couple as modern, enlightened, reform-minded, and chic to its upper-class cronies as well as to a broad Syrian and global constituency aspiring to glamour and luxury culminated in a photo spread in a now-infamous *Vogue* article. In those pages, Asma' al-Asad, "a rose in the desert,"[37] became a walking, talking metaphor of the new moral order, elegant and yet down-to-earth. A former investment banker at J. P. Morgan in London whose purported love affair with Bashar, then studying ophthalmology, had propelled her into a world of celebrity, the first lady epitomized this image of philanthropic refinement—ministering to orphans and hobnobbing with the Jolie-Pitts. As both a businesswoman and a mother, Asma' personified neoliberal efficiency, her skills honed in banking "transferable" to running what she calls her NGO work—as if her projects were independent of the authoritarian regime's mechanisms of social control. Moreover, the *Vogue* article's now-disgraced author, Joan Juliet Buck, notes admiringly that the first lady "runs her office like a business, chairs meeting after meeting, starts work many days at six, never breaks for lunch, and runs home to her children at four." For, as Asma' herself points out, "It's my time with them, and I get them fresh, unedited—I love that. I really do." Far from being simply a technocrat with useful banking skills, the first lady is here positioned as an ordinary working mom and the carrier of an urbane modernity, her "central mission" being, according to Buck, "to change the mind-set of six million Syrians under eighteen, encourage them to engage in what she [Asma'] calls 'active citizenship.'" Bracketing the regime's authoritarianism, Asma' elaborates in the conventional language of neoliberal empowerment: "It's about everyone taking shared responsibility in moving this country forward, about empowerment in a civil society. We all have a stake in this country; it will be what we make it." In celebrating the first lady's Syria Trust for Development, with its youth programs designed to provide extracurricular activities and enhance employment opportunities, the article describes a scene in which Asma' visits children in the Saint Paul orphanage, reproducing the official version of the regime as the guarantor of multifaith coexistence.

Vogue's feature piece, which also lauds the Asad family for being "wildly democratic" and for wanting to give Syria a "brand essence," was pulled from the magazine's website a few weeks later at the first signs of the coming troubles, in a move reminiscent of Soviet strategies of forgetting.[38] But by then it had already been translated into Arabic and was widely cited across social media sites. For those supportive of the regime or ambivalent about its democratic deferrals, the timing of the article was unfortunate, but its celebration of Syria's *tanawwuʿ* (diversity) and the first lady's *anaqa* (elegance) was worthy of some sympathy. For others, it was the source of considerable derision, a blatant instance of hypocrisy and Western naïveté.

People who had not read the piece came to hear about it through others, with its anecdote about the Jolie-Pitts' purported focus on the first family's absence of visible personal security providing the grist for diametrically opposed readings. In the article, a lighthearted Asma' tells Buck about Brad Pitt's concern:

> "My husband was driving us all to lunch, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Brad Pitt was fidgeting. I turned around and asked, 'Is anything wrong?'"
>
> "Where's your security?" asked Pitt.
>
> So I started teasing him—"See that old woman on the street? That's one of them! And that old guy crossing the road? That's the other one!" They both laugh.
>
> The president joins in the punch line: "Brad Pitt wanted to send his security guards here to come and get some training!"

The story is remarkably ambiguous: maybe every single citizen loved the first family, and therefore no one needed protection. This is presumably the story the first lady was telling to calm Pitt's nerves. Or, as activists were quick to point out, every citizen was so fearful that no one would dare to challenge the regime. Or everyone along the predetermined route was part of the secret police, and that is why there was no need for a specific security detail. Even supporters of the regime recognized the official narrative's instability, its vulnerability to rapidly changing circumstances as uprisings broke out across the region. They had questions: How central to this seemingly cosmopolitan regime were its autocratic underpinnings? How far would it go to protect its monopoly on decision-making? These questions were, at this time, open and disputed, and from practically any angle grounds for disavowal and displacement, for a finessing of the situation that valorized the status quo. No one, except just conceivably *Vogue*'s naïve author, regarded Syria as "wildly democratic," but the regime's commitment to reforms (albeit endlessly deferred) and encouragement of its managed civil society activism remained the basis of articulated hopes and attachment for those who could not bear the unknown or imagine salutary alternatives.

The regime's brand and the aspirational consciousness it broadcast were not confined to first-family celebrity or glossy English-language magazines. These were also dramatized in Arabic-language films, taken up in seemingly apolitical advertising campaigns, and generative of new forms of sociality. Take, for example, *Marra Ukhra* (*Once Again* [2010]), a Syrian film whose importance, it must be quickly said, is ethnographic rather than cinematic.[39] When it was shown at film festivals, including repeatedly at Damascus's own, as well as in the few commercial theaters that existed, capacity audiences were filled with individuals mirroring the aspirational glamour and hipness of neoliberal autocracy's urbane elite, their fashion choices inspired by trends in Beirut, Paris, and New York, and lending a pop-music atmosphere of youthful celebrity.

Centered on a love affair between a Lebanese Christian woman and a Syrian Muslim man, both children of the war years in Lebanon, *Marra Ukhra* purports to chronicle the life of an actual military officer posted in Lebanon and the obscure circumstances of his death.[40] Coincidentally, the officer portrayed in the film is the father of the director, Jud Saʿid, but more noteworthy for our purposes is the film's celebration of upward mobility and unbounded wealth. Championing the alliance between finance capital (the lovers,

including a jilted third party, all work in a bank) and neoliberal autocracy, *Marra Ukhra* offers a fantasy made possible by generational change.

The main protagonist, Majd, resides in a deluxe apartment overlooking Damascus and equipped with all the latest gadgets—a large flat-screen television, video game equipment, and most important, a surveillance setup with which he monitors his fellow citizens' internet and Skype conversations. In typical neoliberal fashion, public surveillance in the film has become privatized, internalized, and in effect "outsourced" to the nouveau riche. Majd, clearly the director's alter ego, spies on others voluntarily, without any directive from on high, evidently in response to his need to maintain control.[41] He is a damaged soul, but one capable of redemption in the context of a love story that at the same time sutures the wounds of war in a new collaborative, post-Syrian occupation era. Syrians and Lebanese can work together, even love, across sectarian, historical, and regional divides. When Israel attacks Lebanon "once again," Joyce, Majd's love object, forgives him for spying on her, and it is through his connections and expertise that she can return home. The final scene is especially heavy-handed, showing the two lovers together on a suspension bridge linking Syria to Lebanon.

In general, though, the film's reportage is noticeably spare, at odds with the hagiographic imagery and inflated language of the Hafiz al-Asad era (1970–2000). Even the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 is noted flatly. What distinguishes the film is its relentless attention to lifestyle—its portrayal of the sophisticated well-to-do as connoisseurs of wine, whiskey, and fast cars who live in an ideologically neutral era devoid of class conflict, shot through with market openings and inflected by generational difference. Unlike the father, who "can't handle the new world" and understands that his "time has passed," the son literally wakes up (our hero had spent some years in a coma, conveniently underscoring the cognitive abyss that separates him from the old order) to an altered political climate in which military status has been displaced by purchasing power. Majd is part of a younger, wildly successful generation able to produce evidently unlimited wealth and consume it ostentatiously in a world where glamorous pool parties and countryside hunting excursions are the depicted norm. Majd also enjoys connections to high-ranking members of the old guard—officers from a previous era who have survived to embody the current marriage of finance capital and military might. Their careers spanned a transition to the regime-run banking sector, one that also welcomes the business-oriented, risk-seeking men of a younger generation, like Majd.

The fantasies on display in *Marra Ukhra* present in particularly stark terms a version of neoliberal accommodation of autocracy, one that seems to endorse the coalescence of class, political, and consumer inequalities—or that ignores the inequalities in a way that reform-minded Syrian television directors, even those longing for order, would not. Yet the film dramatizes subtler and more ambivalent renderings of how ideological interpellation operates in the present. It betrays the characteristic forms and intensities of the professional managerial class's investments in a now-lost but memorable sense of security, in the experiences of social freedom, in a commitment to a multicultural secularism protective of minorities, in the joie de vivre that market openings promoted, even in the promise of reforms endlessly put off. Affective investments are related to material enticements, not only for those who can afford them, but also for those who cannot, yet are persuaded to imagine themselves inhabiting a consumerist mirage of pleasure and status. The latter is well illustrated by groups of high school and college students with whom I worked, who despite divergent backgrounds and radically different ambitions—the careers they dreamed about ranged from yoga instructor to civil society activist to policeman and entrepreneur—nevertheless all shared the aspiration to own flashy, fast cars.[42]

Speaking the language of "entrepreneurship" (*riyadat al-aʿmal*) and championing the virtues of volunteerism, these students wanted to "develop themselves while helping society," affirming slogans like the one on a classroom wall that read, Negotiation Is Compromise. As one student put it, acquiring business skills allows a person to be "one's own master." In one exercise in which seventeen students were asked to describe who they were by making collages with glossy images clipped from Arabic- and English-language magazines, most of the girls highlighted fashion and shopping, while some also included sports and music. Most of the boys privileged sports. In one young woman's collage, a picture underscoring multicultural accommodation (young men and women of different ethnic backgrounds and an English-language caption reading, "Celebrating differences") appeared together with a photo of fashion goods bearing the caption "Shopping 24/7" and the words "business," "passion," and "goal" (*hadaf*) rounding out her embrace of neoliberalism. Another female student devoted her poster to an affirmation of patriotism, putting a photo of the president front and center with the declaration "I love my president and I love Syria." But in her discussion, she added that she "hates war, loves food, children, restaurants like Costa Coffee," and was attracted to "fast, fancy cars." Others prised apart the neoliberal from the autocratic, opting for homages to either the leader or money, with the son of a police interrogator lamenting the paucity of pictures of the president in the magazines supplied for the project. As a make-do, he reproduced a familiar Baʿth Party slogan attesting to citizens' love for their leader: "Minhibbak ya hami al-watan" (We love you, O protector of the nation). A young woman was decidedly bored by the assignment, but with no discernible irony covered her entire poster with different representations of money—pictures of Syrian lira, dollar signs, and so on.

Cultivating desires for commodities, fostering new ambitions of upward mobility, and producing individual philanthropic programs envisioning citizens' empowerment in ways that presume their limitations—these were the sorts of disciplinary effects this market-oriented era tended to generate.[43] The appearance of supposed nongovernmental institutions that were nevertheless under the control of the first lady's office—devoted to aiding children with cancer, teaching youth business skills, and offering a range of extracurricular arts programs—explicitly encouraged volunteerism. Helping produce a philanthropic corps on the model of American and European nonprofits, GONGOS (the oxymoronic acronym for government-organized non-governmental organizations) displaced the strident Baʿth Party cadres of the developmentalist state with what the anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach calls a "third sector," an "affective and ethical field" that could put forward the "moral neoliberal" as the exemplar.[44]

These new, sophisticated techniques through which neoliberal autocracy's messages were aestheticized did not eliminate party rallies or cultlike practices altogether, but they did work to relativize them.[45] In 2007, four years before the uprising and amid neoliberal reforms, the regime staged a "presidential election," with the president supposedly garnering 97.6 percent of the vote. The spectacle seemed an especially blatant blast from the past, a reminder of the elder Asad's mechanisms of social control. But even

in that instance, the requisite demonstrations of outward allegiance were confusing in a way that rule in the 1980s and 1990s had not been. The displays of enthusiasm for the son's (uncontested) victory suggested a wellspring of support and an excess of emotion—an attachment that continues to be asserted by committed loyalists and informs the distinct ambivalence experienced by others. As we have seen with the beginning of the uprising itself, this era also produced novel occasions for transgression and resistance, hitherto-unheard voices of fury, piety, and joyous camaraderie, inventive ways of staying safe, and the shifting of limits to what seemed reasonable, questionable, sayable—or maybe even thinkable.

PART TWO: ZONES OF PLEASURE/ZONES OF PROTEST

For the first two months of the uprising, it was common in Syria's two largest cities to hear citizens supportive of the regime or ambivalent about change repeating the diagnosis "Rah tinhal" (It will be resolved), an act of wishful passivity in the present, a fantasy of repair reflecting the attitudes of people who had benefited from or imagined prospering under the pre-uprising conditions of neoliberal reform. As events wore on and resolution proved elusive, the refrain among some of these same people tended to change to "Ma fi badil" (There is no alternative), a justification for continued nonopposition rooted in resignation or cynicism or both. Others, whether outright loyalists or simply averse to irresolution of any sort, began wistfully recalling the days of Hafiz al-Asad, noting that if he "were alive he would have finished the matter once and for all."[46] Yet even those who registered nostalgia for the father's straightforward authoritarianism could do so on grounds that reproduced the ideology of the son's urbanity, labeling protesters as rubes (in Aleppo, the word *dayʿajiyyeh* was common) who were not yet ready for the freedom they were demanding, a subject to which we shall return.

Until protests began in March 2011, the operative contrast taken to summarize the then present had seemed to be between the Damascus of the 2000s, the city of plentiful restaurants and boutique hotels, and the ascetic, drab capital of the 1980s and early 1990s. In the "new Damascus," to modify Christa Salamandra's term,[47] the breadlines in its poor areas were shorter than they had been in the 1980s, while croissant bakeries were springing up in its prosperous neighborhoods. During the lean years of food shortages, "even Hafiz al-Asad had no bananas at home," or so urban legend claims—an example that became a familiar refrain among Damascenes from diverse social classes in their efforts to capture what had changed under Bashar. According to this narrative, what changed was not just the availability of bananas but also the value placed on doing without in times of scarcity.

In the 2000s, affluent and middle-class residents of both Damascus and Aleppo, many armed with computers and iPhones, whiled away their evenings smoking water pipes (available also for home delivery) and chatting without the fear that was so pervasive during the rule of Hafiz. Citizens found themselves even mentioning the young president by name in public without anxiety. New forms of social life were brought into being by young Syrians who found no contradiction in performing bike stunts to the sounds of expletive-peppered hip-hop in the shadow of the Umayyad mosque. Once-scarce coffeehouses peopled by old men with endless time for backgammon gave way to new cafés serving Starbucks-like beverages to a bustling multigenerational clientele, heralding what residents of the capital themselves referred to as the birth of a "café culture." Whereas few in the early 1990s would have dared walk in many parts of the old city at night for fear of being feasted on by voracious Damascene rats, the historic district of 2010 boasted beautifully renovated Ottoman dwellings housing bars, clubs, and restaurants that were attracting locals and tourists by the thousands into the wee hours. Aleppo's old Christian quarter similarly became a site of renovated restaurants and boutique hotels while a luxurious Sheraton near the grand mosque accommodated a growing, globally oriented business clientele.

Although the demonstrations that began in March 2011 have been read by many scholars as expressing the divide between haves and have-nots, the actual contours of protests were more complicated than any neat economic picture of dawning prosperity amid ongoing privation. For "the good life" ultimately indexes the political valences citizens attach to being in their comfort zone, which includes not only consumer pleasures or the means or aspirations to satisfy them but also the structural-symbolic order that organizes everyday life. At issue, then, beyond the simple materiality of the commodity form were the values ascribed to order; the question of what counts as citizen obligation; the importance of piety (whether in support of the status quo or as a language of opposition to it); the dangers of communal affiliations; and leaders' commitments to authoritarian control. This is the bundle of commitments comprising Syria's good life. It includes secularist narratives insisting on the virtues of multisectarian accommodation, and nationalist ones celebrating Syria's geopolitical salience and the need to uphold "the nation's" sovereignty. In the changing context of the region's growing unrest, the regime and its purveyors of cultural capital were obliged to insist on the inextricable connection between this good life and regime survival. Thus, for example, the president's spokesperson Bouthaina Shaʿban, both in written form in a major magazine and in public statements (thereby capturing multiple constituencies), was at pains in March 2011, with all eyes focused on the Egyptian unrest, to underscore the differences between Husni Mubarak's regime and Asad's, focusing particularly on Egypt's abandonment of an Arab nationalist project whose integrity the Syrian regime defended.[48] Her resorting to old-style rhetoric underscored the good life's multidimensionality, welding the magazine's concerns with lifestyle to the regime's longtime nationalist anxieties about losing sovereignty to Western imperialists and Israel. Other loyalists noted the difference between the Mubarak regime's hostile relationship to minorities and the Asads' favorable one. Still others who cheered broadcasts of uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya—and were not necessarily pro-regime in Syria—nevertheless found reasons to dismiss evolving events. Forfending anxieties of disorder and Syrian powerlessness in the face of global powers, they asserted that "Syria was different," the "Syrian people are peaceful," or "it isn't time here yet."[49]

And yet the time clearly had come for something to happen. In what became a battle to represent the future in the present, members of the professional managerial class engaged in the regime's politics of cultural production became galvanized. Perhaps they feared losing the privileges associated with their entanglement in regime-sponsored patronage networks, and/or perhaps they were concerned about being displaced symbolically by the activism—of no longer standing in for the exemplary public or producing the mimetic guidelines for an aspirational Syria pinned to orderly, modern progress. For our purposes the key point is that the regime not only moved to crush the resistance by force but was also able to marshal its ideological state-market apparatus—talk show hosts, actors, directors, and advertisers who were indebted (*mahsub*) to the regime—in the service of maintaining its rule. And this indebtedness was

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not simply about patron-client relationships and the livelihoods they secured; it also bespoke a potent elective affinity between the regime's notion of the good life and the cultural milieu it had nourished over the previous decade to communicate that image. From the standpoint of these new cultural producers, representing secular cultural interests could be both strategically sound and expressive of political commitments.[50] Whatever their motivations, these cultural producers became central purveyors of the good life and inciters of affective attachments to it—so much so that their identification with the regime when the uprising began had loyalists and ambivalent citizens defending the dominant culture industry's position while activists expressed surprise and outrage at these A-list celebrities' "shame" and betrayal.

With the onset of the uprising, radio programs devoted to "lifestyle" and the importance of applying mascara correctly gave way to elaborate talk shows and street interviews in which the initial idea seemed to be to deny that protests were going on (*ma fi shi*), even while simultaneously situating them in terms of orchestrated machinations by foreign governments, often with "America at the heart of the conspiracy." Famous Syrian actors were enlisted for countless television appearances in which fundamental disagreements were overridden by concerns for regime stability, coupled with demands for public displays of loyalty. The well-known actor Basim Yakhur, for example, looking frustrated with his colleagues during a televised roundtable discussion about a humanitarian petition being circulated by the scriptwriter Rima Flayhan, chastised his colleagues for focusing on such an insular issue instead of on "politics." By "politics," Yakhur meant the ways in which the demonstrations had been "orchestrated" (*shay' madrus*) from the start by foreign powers.[51] Flayhan's petition, appealing to the regime to allow passage of provisions for children in the besieged area of Darʿa, had incited considerable debate and a number of threats from both top regime officials and production companies. In McCarthy-esque fashion, signatories were warned that if they did not withdraw their endorsement of the petition, they would be blacklisted from work in Syrian drama. Flayhan and others who lent their names to the document found themselves players in a real-life drama in which livelihoods were threatened, cleavages made public, and retractions demanded.

Syrians identifying with the need for political reforms but stopping short of condemning the regime outright were inclined to claim that the petition exaggerated the situation. According to these folks, some of whom had visited Darʿa after the regime's attack on the area, basic goods were being allowed in, and contrary to rumors, children were not going without milk.[52] To be sure, these prominent Syrians conceded, some residents, out of distrust of the regime, might be unwilling to pick up the emergency milk supplies the army distributed. Given the unrest, however, they had no issue with the army being there as such. Indeed, the famous actor Durayd Lahham publicly defended the army's presence so fulsomely that it prompted a short segment from Al-Jazeera. The segment contrasted his current political stance with the one represented decades before in his film and theatrical portrayals of Ghawwar al-Tushi, the clown-like issuer of courageous political statements, that had made him a beloved actor.[53] A billboard positioned in key thoroughfares of Damascus further underscored Lahham's public commitment to the regime's version of the good life and questioned the patriotic intentions of those who might think otherwise. The actor is depicted declaring, "Syria is a beloved, brotherly, safe country. Who would want other than that?" His celebrity billboard was one of two that appeared on major roadways in the city at the time, replacements for market advertising campaigns that were dwindling as capital fled. The other regime-sanctioned celebrity poster had the veteran Lebanese-Tunisian journalist Bin Jiddu questioning those who questioned the regime's version of events. Trafficking in conventional metaphors of enlightenment to pledge his allegiance, Jiddu's likeness appeared over a caption that read, "The truth is like the sun. No one can extinguish it."

Official rhetoric under Bashar al-Asad never fully abandoned practices reminiscent of the old regime under Hafiz al-Asad, producing guidelines for public speech and action, enforcing obedience and inducing complicity in part by continually generating patently spurious statements. Only this time, celebrities were put on the spot. Many of them registered views of outright support and love for the president, perhaps payback for their access to the good life in an era in which Bashar al-Asad was cultivating his own celebrity status by acknowledging and bankrolling theirs. Others tried to carve out what they identified as a "middle ground" and so were chastised by opposition and pro-regime loyalists alike. This position—deemed "neither here nor there"—betrayed an important ambivalence, conjoining familiar calculations of socioeconomic opportunity and risk with a yearning for a vanishing order where some criticism was tolerated as long as outright political contestation was contained.

Whether intentionally or not, regime-oriented image makers seized on these contradictory feelings, affixing widespread anxieties over vulnerabilities to such abstractions as market-oriented progress, sectarian or rural backwardness, and/or national solidarity. In a more chilling vein, some reverted to old-style Baʿthist Party "Othering," in which those opposed to the regime were all labeled terrorists, smugglers, rural rabble, collaborators, armed gangs, or supporters of *fitna* (discord), carriers of a toxic dissension. A billboard depicting a handgun formed from the repeated phrases "sectarian *fitna*," "media incitement," and "conspiracy" appeared at downtown Damascus bus stops in April–May 2011, sponsored by a small group of advertisers demonstrating their loyalty to the official narrative about the rebellion. Those who refused to stand with the status quo were coded by the regime as subversive "traitors to the nation," even "germs" infecting an otherwise healthy body politic; they were deemed "lacking or excessive in some fatal way,"[54] as William Mazzarella puts it in his analysis of advertising in a different context. The return of billboards marketing the disinfectant Dettol seemed to some a direct communication from the regime, doubling as both an announcement of an affliction and a threat in its own right—likening unruly citizens to germs that must be exterminated.[55] More affirming, but in keeping with the regime's assertions of national solidarity, was the reprise of an old advertisement for Giordano's clothing, featuring attractive teenage soccer fans draped in the official version of what had become by now a contested flag. The familiar combination of red, white, and black in the advertisement contrasted with the uprising's preference for a pre-Baʿthist flag in red, white, and green, a move to distinguish its patriotism from the regime but which also cast the old ads as expressive of regime loyalty.

More complex than either of these variations on obeisance was the "I am with the law" campaign.[56] Using an open hand as the first letter in the pronoun *I* in Arabic to assert that individuals belonged to a diverse national "we"—"young men and young women," "big and small," "rational and sentimental"—this campaign embraced all who were identified as subscribers to the law. Addressed simultaneously in its status of individuals as members of diverse groups and as part of a national unity, the target audience

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was called on to practice moderation, recalling recent fantasies of a neoliberal nation-state where citizens (regime members included) undertook the obligation to uphold the rule of law in order to bring it into being. More billboards cluttered the streets, appealing to proper management practices, the importance of containment, and the curbing of excess—a pithy encapsulation of the good life broadcasting the virtues of national sovereignty and multicultural accommodation through the medium of advertising. Subject to many parodies on Facebook, Twitter, and other internet sites, the moderation campaign exemplified the workings of what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism": an effort on the part of advertisers to create or tap into attachments to a system that is no longer doing affirmative work (if it ever did)—in this case, referencing one that was starting to come apart at the seams.[57]

The "I am with the law" campaign reflected an ambivalence among some in the professional managerial elite, particularly those in advertising, where commitments to an open market order did not necessarily imply unwavering belief in the regime's ability to secure it. And yet those anxious about stability, or with much to lose, could act as though the problem were not primarily the result of authoritarian rule, that the regime's kinder, gentler version of autocracy could be compelled to secure the rule of law, that the neoliberal could outrun the autocratic by way of the national. To believe so was to succumb to a politics of disavowal—I know very well that the regime will not commit to the rule of law, yet nevertheless let's act as if the problem lay with ordinary citizens. This wishful thinking, to put it in different terms, may itself have been a product of the collaboration between political and economic elites. Certainly, from the mid-1990s through the 2000s, this collaboration had bound business elites and other notables to regime politics as usual. And there is no doubt that the more affluent citizens of Damascus and Aleppo —as well as those aspiring to affluence and identifying with neoliberal standards of success—seemed content to forgo political freedoms in exchange for expanded social freedoms, such as tolerated access to the internet and the protection of spaces catering to the expression of urbane tastes and habits. Hopes for the rule of law could even be felt as genuine *and* imagined as conducive to profit, but they were not to be allowed to get in the way of neoliberal autocracy: economic opportunities generated by market openings had to remain tethered to the regime's secular vision of prosperity and security.[58]

Market liberalization likewise structured the terms in which some grievances and alternatives were put forth, so that we see, for example, philanthropic organizations identified with the opposition treating the plight of refugees as an opportunity to brand suffering. And here we encounter the contradictions of neoliberal autocracy in bold relief. For on the one hand, neoliberalism's circumstantial flourishing in the absence of socialist substitutes makes a visionary oppositional politics or a programmatic alternative to market-oriented capitalism difficult to imagine. On the other, the alliance between consumer/advertising-oriented capital and the state, unlike aspects of industrial or military capital, is endangered by the harm being done by the regime to its own citizen customers. The regime's penchant for defining enemies in broad terms and its failure to govern in ways that ensure or even enable popular aspirations for the good life may help explain why Syrians in Aleppo and Damascus began to register their moral outrage politically in relatively small yet growing numbers between May and July of 2012—before violence from all sides made the two cities part of what some have described as a "living hell."[59]

It is tempting to look to the contradictions of neoliberal autocracy to account for the system's particularly brutal breakdown in Syria, but they also exist in similar polities, such as China, Vietnam, and Singapore, which so far have remained stable. And neoliberal autocracy characterizes most cases in the Middle East, including those whose citizens took to the streets in unprecedented numbers in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain, and those where protests were contained or nonexistent. Thus, it is not the contradictions per se that explain either the peaceful protest or the country's devolution into catastrophic violence. Moreover, ordinary people operate within the contradictions of their intimate and political/collective lives all the time.[60] And those contradictions change—as does the political work that ideology does in smoothing them over. For our purposes here, the change in Syria's case runs from a time of autocratic stability undergirding visions of market-oriented prosperity to the period when challenges arose in the form of calls first for reform and then regime change, and the regime responded with violence and cynical efforts at stage management. As we shall see in the following chapters, the technocratic-managerial elite and cultural producers who remain in service in Damascus in 2017–18 are not navigating the same contradictions that they had to deal with before 2011—although they are still doing that navigational work while attending pool parties, peddling in bikeathons, and participating in volunteer efforts, such as cleaning up Damascus's Barada River.[61] Their counterparts from Aleppo, many of whom escaped the devastation of that city by moving to the now-booming coastal town of Tartus, continue to cling to aspects of the good life even while also experiencing its ongoing endangerment.

Instead of citing contradictions in explaining transformation, as if they were an extraordinary feature of an otherwise contradiction-free life, I want to underscore two more precise points. First, as protests got underway, the legacy of neoliberal autocracy from the decade before the uprising helped immunize the Bashar al-Asad regime—muting outrage and deflecting attention from the regime's ongoing brutalities, and confusing people into thinking they had a choice between deposing the dictator now or disposing him later, or for that matter not having to depose him at all. This widespread disposition in the early months of the uprising came to frequent expression in the notion that "the Syrian people" were still too backward or not yet ready for transformation. Second, and relatedly, the subjectivity associated with neoliberal autocracy suggests in its affective dimensions that despite the very real contradictions noted above, *neo*liberalism is compatible with autocracy in a way that liberalism explicitly is not. This affinity is brokered ideologically for ambivalent subjects through the illusion of subjective choice, not in the form of actual opportunities so much as in terms of options to be exercised later. In other words, the ideological work being done by the regime as the uprising got underway was geared to incline people who might otherwise have been open to imagining that the time for rebellion was *now*, to see value in waiting until later.[62] Accustomed to the deferral of political reforms, and with the specter of violence looming large, citizens in Damascus and Aleppo chose quiescence, opening a gap between those who were newly discovering the pleasures of politics by acting in concert and those for whom civil society and the ballot box were not obvious "panaceas" for the ills of dictatorship.[63] The hallmark of these ambivalent subjects was their inability to entertain the possibility of a salutary alternative to what they could admit was a problematic status quo: think again of Octave Mannoni's account of ideological disavowal, "I know very well, yet nevertheless . . ."

PART THREE: A TALE OF TWO CITIES (OR, ANTICIPATING OBJECTIONS)

Expressed in the language of game theory, ideology as we see it operating in Syria carries out dual signaling functions, with the same vision of benevolent autocracy serving simultaneously to seduce opposition activists into imagining that their grievances would be addressed and to keep citizens who were ambivalent about the uprising anchored to a fantasy of deferral. Expressed in the language of social theory, ideology is polysemous and activates different addressees in myriad and divergent ways that change over time. But more precisely, as form, it works according to a push-pull logic, enjoining some subjects to desire—not simply accept—the status quo. Key to this desire is what Fredric Jameson calls a "utopian impulse" toward some imaginary social harmony or sense of plenitude or ideal leadership. The regime activated this impulse while simultaneously seeking to foreclose its excess.[64]

It could be objected that this emphasis on ideology underplays other important considerations that would help in understanding citizen ambivalence in Syria's two major cities. Chief among these is the fear of repression, and no doubt much coercive power was devoted to discouraging rebellion in Aleppo and Damascus. Nevertheless, efforts to suppress dissent elsewhere did not keep protesters from taking to the streets.[65] Moreover, when repression worsened in both cities in May and June 2012, resistance (although still relatively small) increased rather than diminished, evidently in response.

Another concern might be that protests were more common in these metropolitan centers, even from the get-go, than is often acknowledged. A show of solidarity with the people of Libya in front of the embassy as early as February 22, 2011, and protests after Friday prayers at the Umayyad mosque by March of that year meant that some Damascenes were indeed "early movers," with a group of secular-minded activists often leading the charge. Flash mobs and graffiti activism in both cities registered important, if small-scale, opposition to the regime. And occasional funeral marches in outlying areas of both cities threatened to overflow into the city centers, undercutting the regime's insistence to these populations that all was normal, that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.[66] Nevertheless, all told, and in comparison with other less metropolitan areas or protests in other countries such as Yemen or Egypt, the number of participants involved in these actions remained small.[67] The reluctance to get involved was especially notable in Aleppo, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s had been a key area of rebellion against the previous Asad regime.

One seemingly compelling but flawed objection to a focus on ideology points to the "economic geography" of the protests.[68] In this view, the conflict is between the haves and the have-nots, with the relative quiescence so apparent in the affluent parts of Damascus and Aleppo coinciding with the geographic distribution of wealth in the two cities—both in comparison with other cities and internally with regard to neighborhood. On the one hand, there is some evidence to support this explanation. Activists on the ground at the time reported that highly touted demonstrations in affluent parts of these big cities (such as the one in Mezze, in Damascus, on February 18, 2012) drew their crowds from adjacent poorer areas that had already been engaged in rebellion.[69] Moreover, citizens in drought-stricken areas of the countryside, in less well-to-do cities, in city outskirts where rural migrants had moved, and in the markedly poorer parts of well-to-do neighborhoods were remarkably resolute in waging opposition (both peaceful and armed), often at tremendous bodily risk.[70] In contrast, there is ample indication that old-money bourgeois families and the swelling ranks of the nouveau riche in the posh downtowns generally preferred wishing away the manifest need for political transformation over joining the struggle to bring it about.

However, the onset of conflict does not reduce neatly to this sort of economic determinism: economic data before the uprising show a more complicated picture of prosperity and hardship than economic reductionism would allow for, with important countervailing tendencies like continued subsidies for basic foodstuffs, economic growth, and a rise in foreign direct investment offsetting analyses focused solely on the bleak.[71] Nor were the places where the uprising began the hardest hit by negative economic developments. And economic indicators suggest a temporal lag between protest involvement and stresses like the ongoing mismanagement of drought conditions or the lifting of energy subsidies.[72] Moreover, in poor areas throughout Syria, the demands expressed in the early days of the rebellion were not simply or even primarily economic in character. Although economic determinants of discontent need not find expression in economistic language, repeated calls for the "downfall of the regime," "freedom," and "dignity," and increasingly as time went on, assertions that "God is great," cast additional doubt on economic interpretations of the uprising.[73] Referring to the Syrian president's then-prominent spokesperson Bouthaina Shaʿban, people in a poor area in the coastal city of Lattakia chanted in March 2011, "O Bouthaina, O Shaʿban, the Syrian people are not hungry" (Ya Buthayna, wa ya Shaʿban, al-shaʿb al-Suri mu juʿan).[74] The persistence of such slogans point to an *ideological* geography of protest—one embracing divergent patterns of consumption and commitment, suggesting a variegated relationship to market-oriented openings and the pleasures they afford.

A housing boom in the 2000s turned areas adjacent to the downtowns of Aleppo and Damascus into a font of wealth for inhabitants who had formerly lived modestly from farming or operating small businesses.[75] These families became well-to-do—but they nevertheless were understood by supporters of the regime in Damascus and Aleppo as Other, as country bumpkins, simple folk (*darawish*), and even nomads (*nawar*)—all derogatory terms that indicate how unreliably income maps onto political power or social status. Wealthy inhabitants in these areas of resistance tended to have large families and renewed commitments to pious practices, in marked contrast to the lifestyle choices exemplified emblematically by the first family. Their ideological interpellation was partial because their aspirationalism was often misrecognized—to recall the stark symbolism of Althusser's allegory—in that their wealth provided an unacceptable basis for more than superficial inclusion in the elite world of urbanity central to the regime's political aesthetic. Being wealthy, in short, did not necessarily imply identifying with the glitzy, assertively modern aspects of the "enlightened" (*tanwiri*) elite. And, of course, citizens attached to fantasies of the officially sanctioned good life were not necessarily capable of achieving it. Moreover, although some loyalists did claim that first-moving protesters were uncivilized rural or tribal folk, there were plenty of rural and tribally organized regime supporters in places like Dayr al-Zur and a significant number of urban families allied with resistance in cities such as Hama and Homs. The protests in the poorer parts of Aleppo, still counted as within its municipal boundaries, were small. Most of eastern

Aleppo—although in many ways a different world from the affluent western part—chose not to rise up in solidarity with the small group of young activists on the ground there in 2011.[76]

Furthermore, it seems common globally that young people are amenable to risk taking, and judging from protests large and small, Syria was no exception. Many protesters were too young to remember the regime's suppression of rebellion in Hama and Aleppo.[77] Their partial interpellation into the neoliberal autocratic world meant embracing the value of liberal political "freedom" while avoiding an older generation's Communist Party– or socialism-inspired emphasis on the structural injustices of market capitalism. For some protesters in this post-Hama, post-Soviet era, a political focus on the elimination of tyranny implied sharing the regime's neoliberal fantasies of consumer freedom, but registered a loss of faith in the autocratic regime's ability or willingness to secure it. The regime's neoliberal image-making may have unintentionally fostered a generation of couch surfing Facebook enthusiasts, who in addition to being tired of regime-sponsored corruption were globally networked and fluent in the language of human rights, electoral contestation, "civil society" activism, and individual empowerment. The regime's efforts thus had two quite divergent effects on a similarly situated (young, urban, privileged) population: either the regime could attach these young people ambivalently to the status quo in a spirit of "I know very well, yet nevertheless . . ." or it could help motivate them to embrace oppositional politics in an effort to press for democratic freedoms that the regime promised but did not deliver. Even the small university protests in Aleppo and the youth activism in mixed-income neighborhoods of Damascus bore witness to the generational dimensions of the contention, which crossed class lines and made little recourse to slogans voicing explicitly class-based demands or grievances.[78] In short, we do not see a neat correlation between economic disadvantage and protest, and the protesters themselves did not consistently declare themselves as suffering economically.

The example of the area of Muʿaddamiyya lays bare the complexities that make purely economic analyses inadequate to our understanding of political fault lines. Known for its auto repair shops, small transport businesses, and household farms, Muʿaddamiyya is considered part of the Rif Dimashq, best translated in this context as the outskirts of Damascus, in what used to be the capital's agrarian hinterland. The inhabitants are generally poor or lower middle class, and they tend to identify as pious Sunnis. As early as April and May of 2011, the regime was in negotiations with the elders of the area to contain discontent: inspired by protests elsewhere, restive citizens had begun to demonstrate; and in an effort to manage conflict, the regime promised to compensate inhabitants for farmland bought by the state in the 1970s–80s at below-market costs—or outright expropriated. Historically, this land claimed by residents of Muʿaddamiyya had been used for housing units for the regime's Defense Brigades (Saraya al-Difaʿ), led by Rifʿat al-Asad, brother to the then president Hafiz al-Asad. Called Sumariyya, the brigades' enclave within Muʿaddamiyya housed military personnel who self-identified as ʿAlawi, wore special uniforms, and were known for their brutality, economic corruption, personal loyalty to their leader, and endorsement of an energetic, fast-paced project of secular modernization. Later, with Rifʿat's failed coup attempt against his sibling in 1983, troops specifically loyal to the president and his sons were moved into Sumariyya and brought their families into the enclave, which remained identified (by residents and outsiders) as ʿAlawi, security-driven, reliant on regime patronage, and poor.[79]

According to stories circulating in the first days of May 2011, the elders of Muʿaddamiyya had conceded to a compensation deal with the regime, and for a week the area was quiet. Young people then returned to the street, either disregarding the agreement or doubting that it would be implemented, calling for the regime's downfall, staging demonstrations, and blocking a main artery leading into downtown Damascus. Muʿaddamiyya has been more or less under siege ever since. As the violence escalated, so too did retaliations and counter-retaliations, with the neighboring area of Sumariyya (still inhabited by staunch loyalists) also drawn into the fighting on the side of the regime and consequently made vulnerable to attack, especially to car bombs. The contrast between Muʿaddamiyya and Sumariyya demonstrates how similar class positions can be trumped by sectarian divisions. But the initial willingness of some young people in Muʿaddamiyya to violate an agreement secured by elders also suggests a politically relevant generational cleavage. Young people there were not won over to the regime's strategies of public affect management emphasizing the virtues of status quo stability. That the elders could not control their younger constituents was a harbinger of things to come.

The class dimensions of the conflict are also significantly complicated by the fact that certain merchants involved in the regime's brand of crony capitalism were reliably said to be funding the resistance.[80] Some of these businessmen became fed up with the rampant corruption—the requisite payoffs, protection-racket-like activity, and unfair advantages given to the regime's family members and closest cronies. Others continued to operate beneath the radar or play a double game from inside Syria. The success of a call for shopkeepers to strike in May 2012, as opposed to the resounding failure to get them to shutter their businesses when the same move was made in May 2011, is emblematic of a general point: class and other collective solidarities toward the conflict were—and remain—in flux.

Reducing the conflict to an economic struggle, moreover, would be to ignore the ongoing recruitment in large numbers of *shabbiha*, the rank-and-file thugs in the president's security forces who tend to hail from lower-income families.[81] Many of them self-identify as ʿAlawi, and sectarian affiliations (as the juxtaposition of Muʿaddamiyya to Sumariyya implies) have become increasingly salient as to when and where the violence takes place. It may well be that the regime's sectarian claim-making worked to prevent protests from those Syrians anxious about their existential survival as minorities. The regime certainly galvanized these anxieties by underscoring the affiliation of ʿAlawi leaders killed in battle (as early as a televised funeral in Homs in May 2011), arming "popular committees" that often identify as threatened Christian and ʿAlawi "minorities," and sustaining a rumor mill by turning out seductive conspiracy theories that tapped into long-standing (and in some ways real-enough) fears of external threat and internal subversion. Images of the regime as the guarantor of a sovereign, stable nation-state and an explicitly multisectarian order belong to a recognizably decades-old, evolving nationalist repertoire that has also, paradoxically, required the reproduction of sectarian difference and anxiety, a central theme of chapter 5. For now, the point is that these fantasies of accommodation and order could be readily harnessed to figurations of market-oriented prosperity—for people ranging from wealthy and upstart neoliberals to poor regime thugs. In fact, the regime could mediate these contradictions such that even those who might otherwise be excluded from the dream of social mobility could feel that they had some access to it.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused primarily on the first year and a half of the uprising and the decade preceding it, an era in which market reforms were both product and productive of new consumer-oriented aspirations. Investments in the ideal of economic prosperity became moored to familiar older fantasies of national sovereignty and multisectarian peaceful coexistence (see chapters 4 and 5, respectively, where the latter two themes are considered in depth). Only partially economic in content, the aspirational consciousness animating new forms of sociability in this period found iconic expression in the Lady Di and Prince Charles–like imagery of "Syria's first family." Idealizing the modern, urban, and urbane professional managerial class, the first family offered one version of what it meant to be exemplary of the good life in Syria: glamorous, entrepreneurial, individually responsible, and civilized. The veneer of a kinder, gentler neoliberal autocracy glossed over the economic cruelties caused by the state's attenuation of social provisioning (including widening inequalities and new opportunities for corruption), and as time went on the escalating use of coercive control to handle unrest. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the uprising was more complicated than a simple class-based or economic-grievance narrative would suggest, addressing a broader imaginary of desire and attachment.

As authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya began to teeter, some Syrians, affectively invested in stability and consumer pleasure, voiced hopes that the seemingly popular young president would understand the need for reforms and manage an orderly transition to an electoral system. Instead, in apparent homage to the more overtly dictatorial practices of the father, old-guard political advisers came out of retirement like a recurrent nightmare, making the regime's fear of losing autocratic control glaringly apparent. This will to regime dominance found dramatic and unusually candid expression in a *New York Times* interview with Bashar's notorious first cousin and (fittingly, given the neoliberal context) paragon of corrupt entrepreneurship, Rami Makhluf. As early as May 10, 2011, even as the president went on promising reforms, Makhluf openly declared that the regime was determined to "fight to the end."[82] Meanwhile, security forces were rediscovering their raison d'être in their (re)expanded duties as the signs of disrespect for autocratic control became more manifest. And in an ideological struggle over who stands in for Syria, it was children who would come to substitute for the first family, offering up a vision of innocence and helplessness in the face of the regime's overweening display of political and increasingly military power. Whether it was the young students arrested in Darʿa, the more anonymous children who prompted anxieties about milk deprivation in the face of a military siege, or the widely circulated images of a sweet-looking, pudgy thirteen-year-old boy, Hamza al-Khateeb (al-Khatib), who was tortured to death by regime operatives in Darʿa later in 2011, children signaled the disruptions of generational change, unmet aspirations for political reforms and noncorrupt modes of socioeconomic access, and the various affronts to dignity (*karama*; *karameh*) that the neoliberal autocracy both effected and attempted to conceal.[83] The regime's idealized world was revealed as a fantasy with little chance of becoming an actual world to which the fantasy could be anchored. In this context, a younger generation's oppositional savvy in circulating images of brutality became a form of protest in its own right, a way of bearing the brutality by bearing witness.