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MOBILISATIONS AS A RESULT OF DELIBERATION AND POLARISING CRISIS

THE PEACEFUL PROTESTS IN SYRIA (2011)

Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay
Translated from French by Michael O'Mahony

> "This appearance of stability was self-fulfilling: if people expected protest to fail, only the courageous or foolhardy would participate. With such small numbers, protest could not fail to fail. So long as revolution remained 'unthinkable', it remained undoable. It could come to pass only when large numbers of people began to 'think the unthinkable'."[1]

On 13 March 2011, fifteen adolescents from Daraa, in southern Syria, were tortured by the intelligence services for having written anti-regime graffiti. This incident was followed by protests in Daraa itself from 15 March which very quickly spread to a large part of the country.[2] These demonstrations, peaceful in nature, raise a series of questions. Why take to the streets when it is known that the authorities are prepared to fire on the crowd? How can protest be organised when police surveillance is omnipresent? How can we account for non-sectarian slogans and the presence of ethnic and religious minorities in the marches – at odds with the supposedly dominant sectarian logic?

To answer these questions, we undertook field work principally in that part of the governorate of Aleppo which is outside the control of the government in Damascus.[3] Our results contribute however to an understanding of the initial phase of the Syrian movement as a whole, and suggest certain interpretations, whilst disproving others. Several approaches – resource mobilisation, moral shock, rational choice theory (RCT) – prove, to varying degrees, to be inadequate for explaining the emergence of this protest movement.

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[1] Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 172.

[2] For more on the Syrian revolution, see François Burgat, Bruno Paoli (eds), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013). For more on the governorate of Aleppo, see Jean-Claude David, "Dynamiques citadines et production de l'espace en Syrie, le cas d'Alep", in "La ville en Syrie et ses territoires: héritages et mutations", *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 52, 2000, 279-97.

[3] A first field study was conducted between December 2012 and January 2013 in Aleppo, Al-Bab, Mara, Azaz, Bestane Qobane, Afrin, Akhtarin and Al-Rai. A second field study conducted in August 2013 in Aleppo, Hureitan and Anadan, enabled us to supplement our sources. Our work is based on some 100 interviews which focus particularly on the peaceful mobilisations in the governorate. All but four of those interviewed were male, and interviewees were generally young and had taken part in the first waves of protest. The interviews have been anonymised in order to protect our interviewees. Furthermore, different interviews with activists from other regions have confirmed our assumptions.

Testing different theories in the Syrian context

A first set of interpretations, although not within a clearly defined theoretical framework, suggest that the demonstrations can be explained by sectarian tensions and the deterioration of the economic situation, against a backdrop of uncontrolled population growth. In particular, in line with the theory of relative frustration, Fabrice Balanche seeks to demonstrate that the Syrian regime's refusal to acknowledge demands led to protest.[1] Furthermore, he claims that the deterioration of the economic situation exacerbated community tensions as a result of the unequal allocation of resources. Thus Balanche, author of "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", views the protest movement of spring 2011 as a mobilisation of the peripheral Sunni Arab areas against the Alawite community.[2]

This interpretation is flawed in two ways: on the one hand, the identity of the protestors is deduced from the geographical location of the demonstrations and, on the other hand, the nature of the demands is automatically assumed from the supposed identity of the protestors. However, as our interviews indicate, individuals often demonstrate beyond their neighbourhood, which makes the link between the place of demonstration and the identity of the demonstrators more tenuous. Furthermore, neighbourhoods are rarely homogenous, which introduces further uncertainty. Lastly, if sectarian logic was initially dominant in Syria, how is it that young Kurds and Christians figured among the protestors in the governorate of Aleppo, and that Kurds and Druze mobilised in the east and south of Syria respectively?[3]

The other element in this interpretation – that the protestors would belong to marginalised populations – should at the very least be qualified. Demonstrators did not, in fact, all hail from the peripheral and marginalised Sunni areas, far from it. A proportion of Aleppo's middle-class youth took part in the protests and, in many cases, played a decisive role in their organisation. Moreover, the protests began in Daraa, a region known for its links with the central government.

Lastly, these analyses fail to address the discourse of the demonstrators – described as an "ideological smokescreen" – thus avoiding the issue of the subjectivity of the actors in favour of objectivist explanations, in which demands automatically translate to the mobilisation of immutable "communities".[4] In particular, this approach does not explain why individuals engaged at this precise moment in the mobilisation. The economic-sectarian hypothesis fails therefore to analyse what is created in the protests – a deliberation, a discourse, resources – preventing any understanding of the Syrian movement's trajectory.

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[1] Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[2] Fabrice Balanche, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", *Outre-terre*, 29(3), 2011, 437-58.

[3] The interviews conducted with members of the Kurdish population in Syria between 2011 and 2013 in Erbil (October 2011, February 2012), Dohouk, Afrin and Bestane Qobane (December 2012, January 2013), revealed a strong mobilisation of the Kurdish population from the moment the incident in Daraa became known. The first Kurdish demonstration in solidarity with the Daraa victims took place on 17 March 2011 in the town of Amouda. See also Arthur Quesnay, Cyril Roussel, "Avec qui se battre? Le dilemme kurde", in François Burgat, Bruno Paoli (eds), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013). Although massive mobilisation was not observed in the Druze regions, the Druze did demonstrate in marches comprising several hundred individuals: see Cyril Roussel, *Pouvoir et communautés dans la Syrie baathiste. La communauté druze et l'État syrien* (Paris: IREMMO/L'Harmattan, forthcoming).

[4] Fabrice Balanche, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", 437-8. *Translator's note*: all quoted material from French-language publications is translated by M O'Mahony, unless a published English-language translation exists, in which case the relevant reference will be given.

Nor can resource mobilisation theories account for the Syrian case. Indeed, on the eve of the revolution, no organised group had the resources to coordinate a mobilisation against the incumbent regime. The few dissidents were either in prison or exile; the principal institutions under close surveillance. Moreover, the regime had introduced modes of management – via private intermediaries [*décharge*], or based on sectarianism [*communautarisation*] – in order to ensure the stability of the political order.[1] The observation made by Élizabeth Picard in 2005 still holds:

> "Questioning civil society, secular intellectual circles and Islamic movements, it is clear that, even when combined with external pressures and in a context of economic crisis, societal dynamics struggle to bring about democratic change in Syria."[2]

In adopting the resource mobilisation approach at a local level, some authors have however hypothesised that the first protests emerged in those regions where networks of solidarity – clan, transnational, criminal, family – are densest and most interrelated, notably in Daraa, where the protesting began, as well as in Idlib, Homs and Deir ez-Zor.[3] However, interviews conducted with participants in the first demonstrations in the four provinces do not support this hypothesis because these participants were not members of influential families, nor of the networks linked to the various forms of trafficking that take place at the Syrian borders.[4] Furthermore, even if we accept this hypothesis, how does this explain how the protest spread immediately to distant regions, where these networks did not play a significant role? In the end, there was an almost universal absence of associations, political parties, important cultural figures, and tribes in this initial protest movement.

The Syrian demonstrations therefore raise the issue of mobilisations without mobilisers, in line with the events in Iran in 1979 and East Germany in 1989. However, the two major approaches taken to account for these mobilisations – moral shock and rational choice theory (RCT) – cannot be applied here due to their internal weaknesses, rather than because of the specific structural features of the Syrian situation.

The constant reference to Daraa in the interviews leads to the possible hypothesis of a "moral shock" to account for the participation of individuals in the demonstrations.[5] However, this approach does not explain why the protest arose *at this precise moment in time*. The Daraa incident certainly sparked outrage, but did not reveal anything new to the Syrian public, who already knew of the regime's violence and the recurrent nature of such incidents.[1] In this sense, the Syrian case validates the criticism of the potentially circular nature of the moral shock concept, insofar as it is difficult to specify at what moment the outrage is such that it leads to mobilisation.[2] Consequently, the role that the Daraa events played in triggering national protests must be put into perspective. In a regime as repressive as Syria, public expression of an emotion constitutes an act of protest that indicates *prior* opposition to the regime. The graffiti in Daraa which sparked the incident was part of a series of protests that received little media coverage, and which demonstrated that mobilisation was already underway.[3]

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[1] Here, the meaning of the concept of "décharge" is that given by Béatrice Hibou, namely "the use of private intermediaries as the dominant mode of governmentality", in "Retrait ou redéploiement de l'État", *Critique internationale*, 1, 1998, 151-68 (154). Regarding *décharge* in Syria, see Thomas Pierret, Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of "authoritarian upgrading" in Syria: private welfare, Islamic charities, and the rise of the Zayd movement", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41, 4, 2009, 595-614. Regarding community management, see Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (Paris: Karthala, 2006); Cyril Roussel, *Pouvoir et communautés dans la Syrie baathiste. La communauté druze et l'État syrien* (Paris: IREMMO/L'Harmattan, forthcoming).

[2] Élizabeth Picard, "Syrie: la coalition autoritaire fait de la résistance", *Politique étrangère*, 70(4), 2005, 755-68 (762).

[3] Reinoud Leenders, Steven Heydemann, "Popular mobilisation in Syria: opportunity and threat, and the social networks of the early risers", *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(2), 2012, 139-59. Regarding the "early risers" see Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[4] Cf. in particular the interview conducted in October 2013 in Amman with an individual who took part in the first demonstrations in the provinces of Daraa. Interviews with demonstrators from Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, Latakia, Qamishli and Deir ez-Zor support these hypotheses for the whole of Syria.

[5] James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 106. The author defines moral shock as: "an unexpected event or piece of information [which] raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action, with or without the network of personal contacts emphasized in mobilisation and process theories".

In principle, RCT offers another way to account for mobilisation, but it encounters a *prima facie* obstacle. In other words, how can we explain that individuals take to the streets for the collective good, when the risks to that individual (death, torture) are considerable?[4] The individual in the RCT model has no interest in involving him or herself in protest when repression makes the cost of doing so exorbitant.[5] Within this theoretical framework, it is even harder to get round the free-rider paradox, given that no selective incentive can be shown. Indeed, the first individuals to demonstrate were not connected to any institution that could significantly affect the costs and benefits of the proposed action, and their demands were never related to a particular sector of society.

To circumvent the free-rider paradox, Mark Granovetter, building on game theory,[6] proposed the critical mass theory (CMT). In this, the benefits that an individual derives from his or her involvement depend directly on the choices of other individuals. Effectively, each individual has a threshold (fixed in advance) above which he or she believes that the number of individuals demonstrating makes the cost of his or her engagement cheap enough, and success likely enough, for him or her to mobilise in turn. These successive engagements can create massive and unexpected demonstrations because, as the distribution of such thresholds is uneven, the protest can experience periods of significant acceleration.

CMT has been used to account for the mobilisations in Iran and East Germany. Thus, Timur Kuran bases his explanation of these events on the reduction of political costs as a result of the growing number of demonstrators, enabling each individual to publicly express private preferences – in this instance, this being his or her discontent – that were previously concealed.[1] Susanne Lohmann generalises Kuran's hypotheses and models individual engagements as a signalling game: "The status quo becomes unsustainable when mass protest activities reveal information about its malign nature and lack of public support".[2] The information on the regime – up to that point invisible because not joined up due to the passivity of the population – becomes public and leads to cascading mobilisation.

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[1] See Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst, 2013).

[2] Ruud Koopmans, Jan W. Duyvendak, "The political construction of the nuclear energy issue and its impact on the mobilisation of the anti-nuclear movements in western Europe", *Social Problems*, 42(2), 1995, 235-51; Francesca Polletta, Edwin Amenta, "Second that emotion? Lessons from once-novel concepts in social movement research", in Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, Francesca Polletta (eds), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 303-16 (307-8); Christophe Traïni, "Des sentiments aux émotions (et vice versa): Comment devient-on militant de la cause animale?", *Revue française de science politique*, 60(2), 2010, 335-58.

[3] Leïla Vignal reports that the first calls to demonstrate were made on social networks in February 2011 (in "Jours tranquilles à Damas: Aperçus de la révolte syrienne", *Esprit*, 6, 2011, 94-102 (99)). Our interviews conducted in Aleppo support this.

[4] Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[5] Raymond Boudon highlighted the limits of RCT in explaining political engagement that brought moral values into play and involved unselfish individual behavior. Raymond Boudon, *Raison, bonnes raisons* (Paris: PUF, 2003, 42-7).

[6] Mark Granovetter, "Threshold models of collective behavior", *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(6), 1978, 1420-43. He draws in particular on Thomas C. Shelling, "Hockey helmets, concealed weapons, and daylight saving: a study of binary choices with externalities", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 17(3), 1973, 381-428.

CMT turns out to be fragile as a theory, however. While the importance of the first demonstrators is recognised, they remain the blind spot of the model. Granovetter and Lohmann effectively assume the existence of "extremist" individuals, defined by their tendency to engage in action independently of the cost of that action, and therefore independently of the participation of others. This category of individual can hardly be said to exist in the Syrian case. In fact, the Syrians who took to the streets were demonstrating for the first time, in a country where public protest is rare, and could not be classed as "extremists" in the sense intended by Lohmann. In leaving unexplained how the first demonstrators become politically engaged, CMT cannot explain the decisive moment of mobilisation. Moreover, the demonstrators who subsequently joined the movement may have done so because they perceived the risks to be less. Such behaviour assumes a calculating individual, who appreciates the risks and the windows of opportunity,[3] without telling us anything about the nature of his or her objectives. RCT hypotheses concerning the selfish rationality of individuals are therefore useless here.

Furthermore, CMT assumes that the preferences of individuals are stable, something which is contradicted by empirical studies of the Iranian and East German revolutions, as well as our own observations. In the case of the Iranian revolution, Kurzman shows the changes in individuals' thresholds for engaging in collective action between 1977 and 1979, as their evaluation of the viability of the movement changes.[4] Public engagement not only reveals existing preferences, but transforms the demonstrators' objectives.

Deliberation and polarisation

What approach can account for demonstrations, both in terms of how they come into being and how they later develop? Peaceful mobilisations and the transition to civil war bring two models into play: firstly, "mobilisations as a result of deliberation" which explains the genesis of protests; and, secondly, a "polarising crisis" which describes the transition to civil war.

The ideal-typical self-mobilising actor has three characteristics. Firstly, he or she calculates the risks and the probabilities of success. Secondly, he or she negotiates between different purposes which may be collective or individual. Lastly, he or she deliberates, that is to say makes his or her decisions following discussions in which preferences are formed.

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[1] Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[2] Susanne Lohmann, "The dynamics of informational cascade: the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989-81", *World Politics*, 47(1), 1994, 42-101 (49).

[3] Sydney Tarrow, "Aiming at a moving target: social science and the recent rebellion in Eastern Europe", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 24(1), 1991, 12-20.

[4] Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 133; Karl-Dieter Opp, Christiane Gern, Peter Voss, *Origins of a Spontaneous Revolution. East Germany, 1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

The model that we are proposing to explain the genesis of the Syrian mobilisations is based on changing individual calculations, sociability and objectives in a non-routine context. Triggered by the Arab revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt), the deliberations that ensued mark the start of the mobilisation. Indeed, the mere act of getting together to discuss current events is a political crime in Syria and implies a form of engagement. Hence, deliberations took place in semi-private spaces (in small groups, on the internet) which guaranteed a minimum of security. The site of the deliberations was strategically important because it was *simultaneously* a place for the exchange of information, for the collective calculation of risks and benefits, and for the comparison of projects. There was a circular relationship between the constant evaluation of the contexts of action, the emotional intensity, and the definition of a collective good. This model also allows us to understand how informal groups enabled demonstrations to last several months, with the most active building up activist capital.

The propensity to act was affected by this non-routine context of deliberation in two ways: the intensive activity involved in calculation, and group dynamics. Firstly, lacking precedents and because of the risks involved, the actions envisaged created uncertainty and therefore an increase in the amount of time and energy spent in discussion before embarking on the slightest course of action. Individuals paid greater attention to the consequences of their actions because the institutional routines, which reduce uncertainty at an individual level, were giving way or disappearing. Minimising risk within actions did not however mean that individuals would make fewer errors, notably because of the high degree of uncertainty and the inexperience of the demonstrators. Secondly, deliberation in small groups can lead to greater risk-taking; psychosociological literature has shown a tendency for decisions to become more radical under certain conditions.[1] This could explain the decisions taken initially, when the risks were high and when the demonstrators did not know for sure whether they would find support from the population.

During these deliberations, participants defined the meaning of the conflict, often by using the same themes and arguments put forward in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. These exchanges helped establish a common position on legitimate means and the nature of their demands. Firstly, the demands focused on the national, universalist and unanimist, over and above local and sectarian solidarity. The refusal to accept the regime's socio-economic concessions, and the moral and political nature of the slogans and symbols, suggest that the protestors were engaged in "a struggle for recognition" which went beyond sectarian and social cleavages, at least for the time being.[2] Personal and sectional interests disappeared from protestors' discourse in favour of collective and quite abstract objectives. Secondly, deliberation on ends was inextricably linked to the choice of means. The reference to the "Arab Spring" also implied the decision to engage in peaceful demonstrations, a decision that would be maintained for several months in spite of the violence and repression.

Deliberation transformed the perceived political opportunities, independently of the evolution of the Syrian regime, even though the anticipation of protest led to a hardening of repression or a more conciliatory attitude, depending on the context. The term "Arab Spring", created jointly by the media and activists, bolstered the Syrians' identification of their own government with the overthrown regimes. Although this term underplays significant differences between the regimes,[1] it is performative and played a decisive role in individual engagement. The successive falls of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi and Ali Abdullah Saleh effectively gave the impression of a Syrian regime ready to topple.

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[1] James A. Stoner, "A comparison of individual and group decisions involving risk", unpublished Master's thesis, Cambridge, MIT, 1961.

[2] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

The movement then expanded in ways that were constrained by repression. Firstly, the protestors could not employ the same repertoire as that used in the other Arab revolutions. They were limited to street protests, the duration of which – initially only a few minutes – subsequently increased, despite the increasingly violent repression. In order to minimise the risks, strong ties and anonymity were systematically preferred to weak ties.[2] In this context, the mobilisation of strong ties is explained by the existence of a space of trust, whereas weak ties involved additional risk-taking. In small groups, the emotional bond, strengthened by risk-taking, made it easier for the group members to decide to act. During the deliberation process, individuals entered a phase of hyper-sociability and very strong emotional involvement. Outside this space of trust, other demonstrators came together individually and anonymously. Anonymity, moreover, limited the protestors' use of their own social capital.

Secondly, the synchronising of protestors' agendas and action repertoires was carried out through the media and the internet in particular. The international news channels, which covered the demonstrations and broadcast the activists' videos, created a sense of belonging to a national movement and, between mobilisations, fostered processes of imitation which remained at a local level in organisational terms. Social networks, notably Facebook and Skype, gradually became tools for mobilisation, coordination and debate, particularly because they guaranteed anonymity.

Exploratory interviews suggest that these hypotheses, tested in the governorate of Aleppo, can be applied to Syria as a whole. It would appear however that, in certain areas where social networks were dense, due in particular to the persistence of tribal solidarities, trust groups may have involved more individuals because transaction guarantees existed as a result of clan affiliations.

The persistence – over several months – of peaceful mobilisations against state institutions that maintained their cohesion, and the transition to civil war, raises questions about the nature of this crisis. This was neither a random synchronisation of crises in different areas, nor the widening of a sectoral crisis.[3] We will define this non-routine situation as "polarising" because it is characterised by three features linked to the initial state of intersectoral relationships.

Firstly, the initial situation was characterised by limited autonomy for the political, trade union, economic and religious sectors due to the importance of cross-cutting dynamics. What this meant was that the organisation of intersectoral relationships was not so much dependent on collusive transactions as on the regulatory action of the security institutions and clientelist networks.

Consequently, the expansion of actors' tactical activities does not date from the crisis, as these actors were required routinely to participate in network dynamics which straddled several sectors. Their relationship with institutions was furthermore marked by mistrust, even de-objectification, which complicated daily interaction. In the crisis, individuals gradually learned to manage the uncertainty, particularly as alternative institutions emerged on the protestors' side.[1]

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[1] Michel Camau, "Un printemps arabe? L'émulation protestataire et ses limites", *L'Année du Maghreb*, 8, 2012, 27-47.

[2] Mark Granovetter, "The strength of weak ties", *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (6), 1973, 1360-80.

[3] See respectively: Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), and Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques: La dynamique des crises multisectorielles* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009).

Furthermore, the regime monitored the institutional actors too closely for the latter to play a role in the genesis of the movement. The protests could not therefore rely on institutional support, which explains the central role of the deliberation sites in the mobilisation. Moreover, the type of control exercised by the ruling power across sectors meant that the defection of an entire institution was unlikely.

Lastly, faced with pacifist and unanimist mobilisations, the choice of civil war was one available strategy, since the security institutions ensured the cohesion of the regime. Thus, far from using minimal force to repress, the regime reacted by designating the protestors as enemies. Because of the way the state institutions functioned as a network, the security apparatus strengthened its role of monitoring and regulating intersectoral relationships through militarisation.

An under-administered police state

Given that the particular forms of the spring 2011 mobilisation were the product of the constraints of the political system, pre-revolution Syrian society must be reconsidered on the basis of three issues: depoliticisation, the monitoring of institutions, and how the repressive apparatus operated.

A depoliticised society

The Syrian regime has produced a highly depoliticised society.[2] Due to economic difficulties and the failure of the collectivisation policies of the 1980s,[3] the government largely lost the capacity to pursue public policies which would ensure support in rural territories or recently urbanised areas. Consequently, the party ceased to be a vector for social advancement for individuals, families and communities.[4] On the eve of the protests, it had little support in the villages and small towns, especially when compared to the 1970s.[5] Moreover, the party structures no longer constituted the essential resource for political elites. An inhabitant of Mara, a small town in the north of the governorate of Aleppo explains:

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[1] Benjamin Gourisse, "Participation électorale, penetration de l'État et violence armée dans la crise politique turque de la seconde moitié des années 1970. Contribution à l'analyse des crises politiques longues", *Politix*, 98 (2), 2012, 171-93.

[2] Here the term "depoliticization" refers to the absence of the social production of politics and, conversely, to the inability of political organisations to use social activities for their own ends. See Jacques Lagroye (ed.), *La politisation* (Paris: Belin, 2003, 3-4).

[3] Myriam Ababsa, "Le démantèlement des fermes d'État syriennes: une contre-réforme agraire (2000-2005)", in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, Mohammed Al-Dbiyat (eds), *La Syrie au present: Reflets d'une société* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2007), 739-45.

[4] Eberhard Kienle, "Entre jama'a et classe: Le pouvoir politique en Syrie contemporaine", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 59-60, 1991, 211-39.

[5] Alasdair Drysdale, "Center and periphery in Syria: a political geographic study", doctoral thesis, Chicago, University of Michigan, 1977; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Local politics in Syria: organization and mobilisation in four village cases", *Middle East Journal*, 30(1), 1976, 1-24.

> "Us civil servants, we were all members of the Baath party. It was an effective way to be promoted in the administration. It was certainly not about doing any politics."[1]

Membership of the Baath party became purely bureaucratic, necessary if you wanted to study or enter the civil service. In the 2000s, the Baath party had many members, but few true believers.

Abandoning its historical social base, the regime was sustained by a clientelist system that operated in favour of a select group. Resources were captured for the benefit of a new middle class, directly linked to the regime, which drained the wealth from whole sectors of the economy.[2] "Again, in comparison with other authoritarian regimes, in particular in the Arab region, the Syrian regime had entered a "post-populist" phase where maintaining the privileges of the group in power took precedence over the promises of development", explains Élizabeth Picard.[3] Syrian politics worked for the benefit of an elite that recruited from an Alawite clan and from among the Christian and Sunni Arab middle class.[4]

This depoliticisation was particularly visible in the distance between the authorities, who had been appointed following non-transparent processes, and the rest of the population. Elections in Syria were very formal, with no real competition, and the parties allied with the Baath party were simply satellites which did not offer any political alternative.

> "'In January 2011, just before the revolution', confides M., an inhabitant of Aleppo, 'the mayor of Aleppo was suddenly replaced, for what reason we don't know. But this was common practice, the political system was closed in on itself and the population had very little information on its leaders.'"[5]

Furthermore the Baathist regime had systematically eliminated all the alternative political movements. The repression was particularly effective because on the eve of the 2011 protest movement, no political opposition organisation had any real foothold in Syria. After the repression in the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood and the left-wing parties were cut off from society.[6] Moreover, the Kurdish uprising in 2004 reinforced the inability of the Syrian Kurd parties to mobilise.[7] The action of the opposition was thus limited to adopting moral and political stances. This weakness of the dissident movements became particularly apparent with the 2005 "Damascus Declaration", widely relayed abroad, which did not result in mobilisations in Syria itself.[8]

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1. Interview with W. in Mara, December 2012.
2. Raymond A. Hinnenbusch, "The political economy of economic liberalization in Syria", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27(3), 1995, 305-20, and "Syria: the politics of economic liberalization", *Third World Quarterly*, 18(2), 1997, 249-65; Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
3. Élizabeth Picard, "Syrie: la coalition autoritaire fait de la résistance", *Politique étrangère*, 70(4), 2005, 755-68 (761).
4. Souhaïl Belhadj, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad: Anatomie d'un regime autoritaire* (Paris: Belin, 2013), 340-3.
5. Interview with M. in Aleppo, January 2013.
6. Élizabeth Picard, "Fin de partis en Syrie", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 81-82, 1996, 207-29 (221).
7. Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 85.
8. The Damascus Declaration, signed in 2005, came out of the deliberations of a platform of intellectuals, dissidents and political parties. It calls for the opening up of the regime.

The absence of social sector autonomy

The regime endeavoured to destroy, control or integrate into its own clientelist networks all those actors likely to mobilise the population, such as professional organisations, tribes, ulamas and intellectuals. Consequently there were areas of society that were weakly institutionalised and the relationships between actors were structured by personal loyalties, without any real autonomy vis-à-vis the clientelist networks linked to the principal leaders of the regime. The satellite institutions of the Baath party, which had helped manage the rural and urban populations in the 1970s, had lost their importance three decades later. Nor did universities constitute a space for political activity. The economic elites operated within networks comprising a mix of the regime's senior officials and members of the security services.[1] In the end, sectoral logics were constantly manipulated by political or security issues. Being close to the *moukhabarat* (intelligence services) could help you reach a more influential position than you might normally obtain within an institution's internal hierarchy. Thus, the director of a school in Mara had to come to an arrangement with the cleaner, who was connected to the party and the security services.[2] Even within the Baath party, the support of one of the security institutions was essential for a career as a party activist. Consequently, even before the crisis of spring 2011, actors operated daily in an environment characterised by a low degree of institutional autonomy and the centrality of cross-cutting actors and issues (in other words, those connected with the security apparatuses and clientelist networks).

The economic difficulties experienced by the regime from the 1990s limited its control over society. Certain sectors – religious, civil society, and cultural – gained autonomy in their everyday affairs and their internal organisation.[3] The clerics constituted a borderline case: the regime did not in fact have the means to interfere in the training of ulamas.[4] Moreover, the religious leaders negotiated with the regime from a relatively favourable position in the context of Islamic revival.[5] Thus, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Salqini, from an important family of ulamas and close to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, was the Mufti of Aleppo during the first demonstrations of 2011.[6] Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad endeavoured to present himself publicly as Sunni, and the Baath institutions were partially

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[1] Élizabeth Picard, "Syrie: la coalition autoritaire fait de la résistance", *Politique étrangère*, 70 (4), 2005, 755-68 (767); Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[2] Interview with D. an inhabitant of Mara. Belhadj cites the example of a senior official who fears "his personal secretary or the young floor runner, as well as the colleague with whom he chats every day". Souhaïl Belhadj, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Asad: Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire* (Paris: Belin, 2013), 318-19.

[3] During the 2000s, given the perception of an all-powerful regime, several studies endeavoured to determine the degree of autonomy enjoyed by ulamas, associations and intellectuals. See respectively: Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mathieu Le Saux, "Les dynamiques contradictoires du champ associatif syrien", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115-116, 2006, 193-209; Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "State/charities relation in Syria: between reinforcement, control and coercion" in Laura Ruiz de Elvira, Tina Zintl, *Civil Society and the State in Syria: The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012) (St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria); Cécile Boëx, "The end of the state monopoly over culture: toward the commodification of cultural and artistic production", *Middle East Critique*, 20(2), 2011, 139-55.

[4] Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*.

[5] Line Khatib, "Islamic revival and the promotion of moderate Islam from above", in Line Khatib, Raphaël Lefèvre, and Jawad Qureshi, *State and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012) (St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria), 111-44.

[6] Thomas Pierret, "Syrie: L'islam dans la revolution", *Politique étrangère*, 4, 2011, 879-91 (886).

Islamised. In the 2000s, religious leaders increased their influence in the education, charity and media sectors.[1]

However, the important sheikhs and imams from mosques mostly collaborated with the Syrian regime, as shown by their attitude during the crisis. In Aleppo, demonstrators thought they were connected to the intelligence services.

> "One of the first demonstrations in which I took part began when the imam from the local mosque openly supported the regime in his Friday sermons. A man stood up mid-sermon and accused him of being a liar and in the pay of the regime. Then he left, accompanied by a number of the worshippers, and the demonstration began."[2]

Religious organisations were riven by divisions and had a low capacity for mobilisation. Thus, religious charitable associations in Aleppo do not feature in the accounts of any demonstrators. Similarly, the Sufi brotherhoods and the *jama'ats*, despite having many members in Aleppo, did not play a significant role in the protests.[3]

The same observation – functional autonomy associated with tight control – can also be made of the cultural sector. Cécile Boëx shows how intellectual circles, closely intertwined with the ruling power, could, in certain contexts, "express critical views concerning the political order, notably through artistic practice", but "principally to further strategies which avoided direct confrontation with power". Consequently, "these modes of anti-establishment expression were confined to a limited social group and to specific resources, and did not have wider mobilising effects"[4] in the crisis. When actors or film directors decided to come out in support of the demonstrators, they were either forced to act individually or anonymously, or to go into exile.

Lastly, the most influential members of the tribes and the minorities were instrumentalised by the regime. In the vicinity of Azaz, the large tribes (Kenlo, Derbala, Amouri, Ayoubi) cooperated with the regime in order to protect their economic interests.[5] The same can be said of the networks of neighbourhood solidarity (*asabiyya*) in Aleppo which did not provide decisive support to the demonstrators.[6]

The impossibility of protest taking place in conjunction with a sector's institutional actors had two consequences: high initial costs for protestors and the the capacity to immediately position oneself outside the sectoral dynamic.

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[1] Thomas Pierret, Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of 'authoritarian upgrading' in Syria: private welfare, Islamic charities, and the rise of the Zayd movement", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41, 4, 2009, 595-614.

[2] Interview with Yo., in Aleppo, 31 December 2012.

[3] Paulo Pinto, "Dangerous liaisons: Sufism and the state in Syria", in Slavica Jakelic, Jason Varsoke (eds), *Crossing Boundaries: From Syria to Slovakia* (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, 14, 2003).

[4] Cécile Boëx, "Mobilisations d'artistes dans le mouvement de révolte en Syrie: modes d'action et limites de l'engagement", in Amin Allal, Thomas Pierret (eds), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes: Devenir révolutionnaires* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), 87-112 (88).

[5] Our interviews conducted in the town of Azaz (December 2012-January 2013) indicate that local power was not rebuilt on the basis of family or tribal logics. These were marginal in the revolutionary process – family and tribes were difficult resources to mobilise in a collective action strategy.

[6] In general, it is important to treat with caution the concept of *asabiyya* as set out by Ibn Khaldoun and reintroduced by Michel Seurat to describe the workings of specific urban solidarity networks: Michel Seurat, *L'État de barbarie* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 84-102. Our conclusions further Élizabeth Picard's criticism of using concepts that tend to particularise universal phenomena, in particular that of *asabiyya* which underlies sectarian interpretations: Élizabeth Picard, "Les liens primordiaux, vecteurs de dynamiques politiques", in Élizabeth Picard (ed.), *La politique dans le monde arabe* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 55-77.

Targeted repression and crowd control

From the start, the Baathist regime established an economy of repression which functioned on the basis of dissuasion via the immediate and brutal repression of any form of dissent. The reduction of resources and the changing demographics led to a gradual deterioration of this system. Syria in 2011 was an under-administered police state.

The regime had established an organisation that had two main functions: controlling institutions and eliminating any dissent. The plethora of security agencies aimed to prevent *coups d'état* and any collective action. The whole state apparatus was involved in spying on the population, including the *mokhtar* (the administrative link at neighbourhood level). Thus, the *mokhtar* for the Bab al-Qadim neighbourhood in Aleppo denounced the protestors. He was sentenced to six years in prison by the Free Syrian Army following the fall of this part of the town in September 2012.[1]

By adopting a preventative approach, the regime saved the costs of repressing an already organised social movement.[2] In this sense, the use of torture and the disappearances played a strategic role in preventing individual engagement. During the spring of 2011, this deterrent principle continued to work on a large part of the population.

> "Even in the neighbourhoods where the inhabitants knew the regime's influence was weaker, fear remained an impediment to our mobilisation. The fear of being arrested by the *chabiha* [generic name referring to individuals without uniforms who participated in the repression] resulted in a type of psychosis, with people no longer even daring to leave their homes."[3]

Moreover, the Kurdish uprising of 2004 had shown the regime that it was necessary to outsource repression. Due to a lack of resources, the regime thus used Arab tribes to put an end to the riots. The expulsion of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) from Syria in 1998 terminated an agreement that allowed the movement to remain in Syria in exchange for keeping the Kurdish population under control.

Furthermore, with resources in decline since the 1980s, the regime had left certain urban and rural territories under-administered. This abandonment of the countryside and new neighbourhoods happened in a context of demographic explosion and rural exodus, accentuated by a series of droughts in the 2000s.[4] As in many of the other countries in the region – Egypt and Turkey for example – Syrian towns experienced rapid population growth.[5] New neighbourhoods with illegal self-built housing sprung up in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Hama. Population numbers in small rural towns exploded from a few thousand inhabitants to tens of thousands.

The state struggled to keep up with the urban expansion and the majority of new neighbourhoods were poorly covered by the security services. In the town of Mara for example, there were some 50 police officers for more than 40,000 inhabitants or, put another way, one police officer per 1,000 inhabitants.

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[1] Interview with O., in Aleppo, August 2013.

[2] Jordi Tejel, "Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la 'dissimulation' à la 'visibilité'?", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 115-116, 2006, 117-33.

[3] Interview with M., in Aleppo, January 2013.

[4] Myriam Ababsa, "Le démantèlement des fermes d'État syriennes: une contre-réforme agraire (2000-2005)", in Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, Mohammed Al-Dbiyat (eds), *La Syrie au present: Reflets d'une société* (Paris: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2007), 739-45.

[5] Jean-François Pérouse (ed.), "Deconstructing the Gecekondu", *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 1, 2004; Patrick Haenni, *L'ordre des caïds: Conjurer la dissidence urbaine au Caire* (Paris: Karthala, 2005).

> "'We were struck by the ease with which we were able to liberate our town', declares an inhabitant of Mara. 'During the first demonstrations, the local police scarcely dared to leave the police station. Then they left the town of their own accord.'"

The ratio of police to population was lower still in the self-built neighbourhoods of Aleppo, such as Assoukar and Salaheddin, the latter with 100,000 inhabitants but without its own police station.

> "In our neighbourhoods [Assoukar], the security forces were very weak. There were about 40 police officers and between 50 and 100 auxiliaries for 300,000 inhabitants."[1]

A revolution of anonymous individuals

The Syrian mobilisation was thus highly improbable. Why would weakly politicised individuals, with no mobilisation structure, decide to stand up to a particularly violent repressive system? The mobilisation can be explained by events outside of Syria – the "Arab Spring" – which allowed the Syrians to glimpse a window of political opportunity. That said, the "Arab Spring" only had an impact because it led to deliberation in semi-private spaces that subsequently played a key role in the decision to engage in action. Furthermore, the forms of action are the result of the constraints imposed by the regime and of the meaning given to engagement within that deliberation.

The effects of the "Arab Spring"

As with other revolutionary contagion – the Springtime of the Peoples in 1848 or the collapse of the Soviet bloc – the "Arab Spring" was perceived by the population as a window of opportunity to transform or overthrow the regime. All the accounts we collected reveal the passion with which the Syrians followed events on television:

> "The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen unfolded like a dream for us! When Tripoli fell, I told myself that it was possible! That we also had a chance against Bashar in Syria! The impossible became thinkable!"[2]

The analytical rigour of the term "Arab Spring", a media and activist construction, is debatable but the term is unquestionably performative, since it changed perceptions.

> "The more information we received on the demonstrations taking place elsewhere, the more the idea of demonstrating seemed a realistic one."[3]

International media, notably CNN, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, played a central role in this process. The way the media characterised the existing regimes – as authoritarian, predatory, suffering from the cult of the leader, and the corruption overseen by the ruling clan – facilitated the identification of the Syrian regime with the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes.

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[1] Interview with Y., in Aleppo, December 2012.
[2] Interview with J., in Al-Bab, December 2012.
[3] Interview with J., in Al-Bab, December 2012.

The revolutions in the other Arab countries also triggered a process of deliberation which, in order to circumvent the regime's control, took place in semi-private spaces. An activist from Aleppo explains:

> "I was captivated by the revolutions, however my mother, with whom I was close, told me immediately with whom I could talk about them, which cousin was dangerous or not."[1]

A young man from Aleppo, who ran a small website design company, installed a television on his premises in order to discover his employees' views.[2]

> "We paid attention to whom we spoke, however in the cafes, the football matches were replaced by the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, which we followed live!"[3]

Following the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011, and anticipating mobilisation, the regime either defused incidents or stepped up the repression, depending on the circumstances. In Daraa, the security services tortured adolescents, whilst in Al-Hariqah, the Minister of the Interior apologised publicly. Furthermore, the regime attempted to convince its citizens that a window of political opportunity did not exist. Thus, Bashar al-Assad declared in the Wall Street Journal on 31 January 2011:

> "If you want to talk about Tunisia and Egypt, this does not concern us; in the end we are not Tunisians and we are not Egyptians."[4]

However, from the end of January, the deliberations prompted public engagement and expressions that would have been unthinkable only several weeks earlier. Under the guise of sermons against Ben Ali and Mubarak, imams from Damascus and Homs launched into veiled criticism of the regime that the public, alive to the context of the "Arab Spring", had no trouble deciphering. On 17 February 2011 in Damascus, a police officer who hit a trader in the shopping district of Al-Hariqah triggered a demonstration against police violence.[5] In February 2011, in Aleppo, a man posted on Facebook his intention to set himself on fire as Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi had done in Tunisia.[6] Another man from Aleppo visited Saadallah al-Jabri Square every Friday in the hope of meeting other protestors and subsequently occupying the square.[7] In the end, the Daraa graffiti was just one of a series of actions that had little media coverage but which indicated that a mobilisation was already underway. The first protests of Friday 18 March 2011 showed that it was possible to demonstrate or, as one inhabitant from Aleppo put it, "the revolution became thinkable".[8]

Moral grammar and unanimity

Drawing on the imaginary of the Arab revolutions, individuals collectively defined a new "moral grammar of social conflicts".[9] Their demands used a vocabulary that referred to universal values:

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[1] Interview with D. A., in Aleppo, August 2013.

[2] Interview with F., in Aleppo, August 2013.

[3] Interview with Ma., in Istanbul, July 2013.

[4] "Interview with Syrian President Bashar as-Assad", *Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011. Available online at http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894

[5] Interviews with S. and AS., in Istanbul, September 2013.

[6] Interview with Ya., in Aleppo, August 2013.

[7] Interview with F., in Aleppo, August 2013.

[8] Interview with B., in Aleppo, November 2013.

[9] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

> "We are demonstrating for our rights as Syrians. In the beginning, I protested in solidarity with the rest of the population against a regime that has confiscated power."[1]

The unanimist nature of the protests was also consistent with a general demand for the recognition of the actors' dignity, specifically outside of their sectarian identity. In this sense, the demonstrations were the starting point of a "struggle for recognition", in which individuals asserted themselves as moral subjects with rights and dignity. The grammar thus created restricted the choice of admissible arguments, legitimate objectives, and acceptable means of achieving these. This was visible in the self-limitation of the movement, in which unanimity of discourse was coupled with pacifism in the forms of action.

Like the inhabitants of Leipzig in 1989 who marched chanting "we are the people", the Syrians created a collective identity through their slogans and their demands.[2] Sectarian demands, often put forward as an organising principle of Syrian society, were not part of the first demonstrations. Thereafter, protestors systematically refused what they described as party "divisions" and particularist demands, as a reaction against the sectarian practice of the regime, as well as to avoid weakening the mobilisation. The unanimity of the revolt seemed obvious to the actors involved because they were young, weakly politicised, and did not identify with the ideological oppositions that structured the mobilisations of the 1980s.

Slogans contributed directly to creating unanimity. "God is great" – a transgressive rallying call in a regime perceived as atheist – drew consensus in a predominantly Sunni region, but did not appear initially to have an anti-Alawite connotation, particularly as other slogans – "*Sunni wa'Alawi, wahad, wahad, wahad*" ("Sunnis and Alawites, united, united, united") and "*wahad, wahad, al-chaab al-suri wahab*" ("united, united, the Syrian people are united") – referred explicitly to a union between religious communities. Videos and witness accounts tell of slogans initially focused on the opening up of political dialogue, which increasingly became radicalised, to the point of demanding the departure of Bashar.

> "In the beginning, our slogans were quite general, copied from the other Arab revolutions. It was only after several demonstrations that we began to chant anti-regime slogans."[3]

"*Yaskut al-nizam*" ("Down with the regime") and "*Ikhal*" ("Out!") indicate the polarisation between demonstrators and regime.

The symbols displayed in the marches mobilise a vision of the state, in which it is the glue binding the Syrian nation together, and explicitly distinguished from the regime. The flag of the pre-Baath era that appeared in demonstrations as demands for the departure of Bashar al-Assad became increasingly explicit illustrates the centrality of the state and national framework – in opposition to the local and sectarian framework. Furthermore, the interest in other regions was clear, notably in the slogans voted for on Facebook that called for a national mobilisation (see below). Lastly, the constant repetition of "Syria" and "freedom", and to a lesser extent "unity" and "nation", in the chants, weekly slogans, and names of political groups, websites and, later, military units, expressed and maintained the national and unanimist definition of the movement.[1]

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[1] Interview with M. H., in Al-Bab, December 2012.

[2] Steven Pfaff, "Collective identity and formal groups in revolutionary mobilizations: East Germany in 1989", *Social Forces*, 75(1), 1996, 91-118.

[3] Interview with M., in Aleppo, January 2013.

Anonymity and the strength of strong ties

The mobilisation caught hold in the governorate of Aleppo because the term “Arab Spring” made sense; however this did not influence how it took shape. The Syrians quickly understood that it was impossible to use the same repertoire of action that they had observed in Tunisia and Egypt.

> “After the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, we began to discuss the different types of action that could be used. We knew that the Syrian regime was a lot stronger, with daunting security services. So we didn't adopt the same types of action as those used in the other countries.”[2]

The occupation of sites was not a viable strategy due to the violent nature of the repressive apparatus.[3] An attempt in Clock Square in Homs on 17 April 2011 resulted in dozens of deaths. Alternative approaches were rapidly abandoned, such as the flash demonstrations organised in affluent neighbourhoods like the Zahra suburb, in the west of Aleppo.

In practice, the action repertoire was limited to meetings, fairly short marches in a public place (mosque, park, university), and anti-regime slogans. Little data is available on those who took part in the demonstrations. Based on videos available on YouTube and the interviews we have access to, it seems that marches were composed, in the main, of young men. Women also took part in marches, grouped together either in the centre or at the rear, and engaged in different types of action, such as throwing rice or ululating. In Aleppo, although predominantly from working-class neighbourhoods, demonstrators also came from the affluent neighbourhoods of west Aleppo. They comprised Sunnis but also Christians and Kurds. In the small towns of the governorate, the marches were more homogenous, essentially made up of Sunni men, but socio-professionally diverse (farmworkers, key members of the community, shop-keepers, civil servants).

The methods of protest adopted were determined by the forms of control put in place by the Syrian regime, which meant that protestors sought to reduce the risk of arrest. In the first place, any meeting involving more than three people was prohibited by the regime. Mosques became the starting point for a large number of demonstrations, because adult males could assemble there, in particular during the Friday sermon. Mosques therefore served as gathering places independently of their religious function.

> “The first demonstration I took part in set off from the mosque of a neighbouring village in Aleppo after Friday prayers – even though the imam was pro-regime. It was spontaneous and not well organised.”[4]

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[1] See Cécile Boëx, “Le rôle de la vidéo dans l'émergence d'une nouvelle culture protestataire”, in François Burgat, Bruno Paoli (eds), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

[2] Interview with A., in Aleppo, December 2012.

[3] A practice adopted in Egypt (Tahrir Square), then in Yemen (the al-Tagheer camp), in Libya (in front of the courthouse in Benghazi), and in Bahrain (Pearl Square). See Marine Poirier, “De la place de la Libération (*al-Tahrir*) à la place du Changement (*al-Taghyir*): transformations des espaces et expressions du politique au Yémen”, in Amin Allal, Thomas Pierret (eds), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes: Devenir révolutionnaires* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), 31-50.

[4] Interview with T., in Aleppo, December 2012.

With the regime unable to monitor every mosque and souk, the demonstrators maintained tactical advantage by varying the locations.

> "Each one of our demonstrations takes place at a different location. The demonstration only lasts a few minutes before dispersing and reforming somewhere else."[1]

Similarly, risk assessment explains how the demonstrations were distributed across neighbourhoods. Indeed, the locations of the demonstrations were not necessarily where the protestors lived; the latter took into account the police presence and some distanced themselves from places where they might be recognised. In a town like Aleppo, the risk of arrest pushed some inhabitants – in particular young people from the most controlled neighbourhoods (the affluent neighbourhoods in the west and the Kurdish neighbourhoods in the north) – to go to the Sunni working-class neighbourhoods, which had been self-built and were under-monitored by the regime.

> "'Those who lived in the rich neighbourhoods, in the west of Aleppo, supported the demonstrators, but we very quickly abandoned the idea of demonstrating in these areas', indicates M., a native of that part of town. 'These neighbourhoods were built with wider roads which make it more difficult to occupy the space when facing the police. Moreover, the police have a larger presence in these neighbourhoods where they live and are garrisoned, whereas those neighbourhoods on the outskirts are less monitored. It is easier for the population to gather together. The security forces, coming from outside of these neighbourhoods, do not know the area so well.'"[2]

Moreover, from September 2011, in the Kurdish towns (Afrin and Bestane Qobane) and in the Kurdish neighbourhood in the north of Aleppo, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the local branch of the PKK, repressed the demonstrations. The young Kurdish activists therefore went to the predominantly Arab neighbourhoods of Aleppo in order to demonstrate.[3]

Secondly, the number of informers working for the regime was such that it was extremely difficult to organise collective action without the security forces learning about it and pre-emptively arresting the coordinators. No organised actor – trade unions, associations, clans – or prominent figure was behind the demonstrations, nor would they play an important role thereafter in Aleppo. Similarly, by monitoring the sheikhs and imams, the regime ensured that no protest coordinated by religious networks took place in the governorate of Aleppo.[4] As far as we know, no imam called for demonstrations, although some did engage in action in an individual capacity.[5]

The impossibility of mobilising existing organisations meant that, to avoid arrest, the forms of coordination that carried the least risk were, on the one hand, anonymity and, on the other hand, strong ties – the solidarity of small family or friendship groups.

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[1] Interview with Y., in Aleppo, December 2012.

[2] Interview with M., in Aleppo, January 2013.

[3] Many interviews conducted with Kurdish activists in Paris, Erbil (Iraq) and the regions of Afrin and Bestane Qobane (December 2012 and January 2013) mention arrests, detentions and intimidation by the PYD; see also the Kurd Watch website: http://www.kurdwatch.org.

[4] Thomas Pierret, "Syrie: l'islam dans la révolution", *Politique étrangère*, 76(4), 2011, 879-91.

[5] An imam explained to us that he went to protest in a mosque far away from his own in order to remain anonymous (interview with a judge of the United Court of the Judiciary Council, Aleppo, January 2013). It was not until a month after the first demonstrations that the religious leaders of Aleppo, including the Grand Mufti of Aleppo, Sheikh Ibrahim Al Salqini, came out and spoke in favour of the demonstrators.

> "Our first demonstrations were spontaneous and comprised individuals who often did not know each other."[1]

Weak ties, particularly useful for spreading messages, were useless in this context as the security services monitored communications. With the risk of being identified so great, activists were unable to mobilise their social capital, consisting mainly of weak ties. Thus, the head of an Aleppo organisation was careful to resign as president at the beginning of April 2011 in order to protect it (although it would remain open).[2] Similarly, the director of a small company did not involve his employees in his activist activities.[3]

The need for anonymity dictated the forms the demonstrations took, particularly in the case of the very first demonstrations to take place in the governorate. Some demonstrators covered their heads to avoid identification. In this respect, the villages also played an important role in the initial phase.

> "Instead of assembling in city centres, we began to demonstrate solely in villages, covering our faces."[4]

In parallel, close family and neighbourhood friendships constituted the framework of the mobilisations.

> "We were a small group of ten people – friends and cousins. The day of the [first] demonstration, we went out into the street, we were frightened! As we advanced chanting our slogans, people gradually joined us. There were a lot of regime spies, but they couldn't all follow us."[5]

In this intimate space, which was also the space occupied by transgressive humour before it became that of the mobilisations, the trust that is essential for risk-taking persisted. The Ahfad al-Kawakibi,[6] Volcano, Ahrar al-Sakhour and Ahrar al-Salaheddin groups in Aleppo, and the core of young people in Al-Bab, enabled the move to action over time.[7] At university, the groups that emerged were, in the first instance, built around students on the same course – the Flowers group in the Faculty of Economics and the Kahraba (electricity) group in the Shariah faculty.[8] This indicates or accentuates a generational divide, which would lead to a reversal of the usual order, with the "chebab" ("young people" in Arabic) taking a leading role instead of the heads of household. The emotional ties between the members of these groups were extremely strong, and they referred to themselves as a second family.[9] When it came to the demonstrations, these activist cores went on to commit themselves to the point of no return when – knowing the police were looking for them – they went underground and, in some cases, turned to violent action.

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1. Interview with K., in Al-Bab, December 2012.
2. Interview with Ya., in Aleppo, August 2003.
3. Interview with F., in Aleppo, August 2013.
4. Interview with T., in Aleppo, December 2012.
5. Interview with H., in Al-Bab, December 2012.
6. "The grandchildren of Kawakibi" – an anti-Ottoman Arab Aleppan nationalist
7. Interviews with members of the different groups in Aleppo and Al-Bab, December 2012, January and August 2013.
8. Interview with B., in Aleppo, August 2013.
9. Interview with F., in Al-Bab, August 2013.

Coordination

Attempts at national coordination initially took the form of calls for unity through Facebook. These remained informal and did not enable the construction of a unified leadership at local or national level. However, the uniformity of the slogans and the action repertoires at national level raises questions about the bottom-up organisation of the movement through the emerging groups of activists.

Firstly, the demonstrators learned protest methods by mimicry – for example, a child singing revolutionary refrains with a megaphone. Media coverage, co-produced by the demonstrators and the international media, became a means of propagating and reproducing the demonstrations' action repertoires. Protestors filmed the demonstrations themselves, with cameras or mobile phones, and broadcast them via YouTube. Young Syrians are part of a generation that film their private lives. Demonstrating represented an exceptional event for young people: this was their first act of protest against the regime at an historic moment in time. The Gulf news channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, made protestors' videos available to those – and there were many – who had satellite dishes, which were tolerated by the regime. Demonstrators could therefore see on television and the internet how other protestors operated. As a result of this process, demonstrations became increasingly standardised, developing a common repertoire, which enabled the actors to portray their mobilisation as part of a national movement.

Secondly, in practical terms, local coordinators organised the protests by compartmentalising activities.

> "We were organised into several small groups, with a few people each. There was no contact between these groups and no-one knew the identity of the other individuals. Each group had a leader who alone met with the other group leaders. For example, every Thursday, I would meet the other group leaders in order to fix the location of the demonstration. If, when the time came, the security services were waiting for us at the chosen location, that would mean that one of the groups was under surveillance. We would then endeavour to find out which group it was and exclude it from the network. Thanks to this system, information and slogans could circulate between us without putting us in danger."[1]

Over time, some activists played the role of courier between the different groups.[2]

Lastly, types and repertoires of action were developed and disseminated nationally by social networks. In a densely connected society, Skype and Facebook became tools of coordination which enabled anonymity – thanks in particular to pseudonyms – and a degree of relative security because it appeared that they were not closely monitored by the regime. Discussion groups and forums were established on Facebook and contacts proliferated on Skype between individuals who did not know each other before the demonstrations. Social networks became a means of sharing slogans and information on future action, helping to shape a national movement in the absence of hierarchical structures or even structures designed for a specific purpose. The Aleppo activists thus participated in the weekly vote, conducted nationally on Facebook, concerning the slogan to be used in the next Friday demonstration. Social networks became platforms for expression devoid of any formal hierarchy, but where cultural

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1. Interview with Y., in Aleppo, December 2013.
2. Interview with O., in Aleppo, August 2013.

capital and technical knowledge influenced who spoke. Coordination did not require any logistical effort, yet it fuelled the sense of belonging to a political revolution.

The choice of civil war

In the spring and summer of 2011, the security apparatus found itself overwhelmed by the scale of the protest movement, without being able to target deterrent violence effectively. Unable to manage the arrests and to maintain control of the territory, the regime pursued a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it attempted to break the national dynamic of the movement by reducing the conflict to local and sectarian-based demands. On the other hand, the use of increasingly greater violence, rather than deterring protestors, had the effect of compelling them to move to armed action.

A repressive apparatus unfit for purpose

In the early months, the leaderless gatherings wrong-footed the security forces, which were used to tracking dissidents. In practical terms, as the demonstrations grew in scale, there was a lack of space in the prisons. The cells were overcrowded, and many of the demonstrators were interrogated late or, sometimes, not at all.[1]

Furthermore, the security forces were undermined by competition between different institutions. In particular, the flow of information between the eighteen intelligence services was limited. As a consequence, several demonstrators, among the most active in the governorate of Aleppo, escaped the regime.

> “The regime arrested me on two occasions however I was always released, even when I was heavily involved in the organisation of the demonstrations. They didn't even ask me any questions. The security services seemed overwhelmed.”[2]

All of those we interviewed talk of having seen informers at the exit of mosques and in the marches, however the protestors who were arrested report that the *moukhabarat* seemed to be unaware of whole swathes of their activity.

The usual techniques of targeting and infiltration turned out to be unsuitable when confronted with a movement made up of small distinct groups.

> “It was very difficult for the regime to target them. [...] Our mobilisation had no leadership, it came about spontaneously, through individual initiatives, without there being a decision-making centre.”[3]

From the end of spring 2011, the government was forced to surrender control of a number of towns around Aleppo and some outlying neighbourhoods, in order to concentrate on a few neighbourhoods, the major roads, and the border posts of the governorate. In so doing, the security forces lost their ability to locate the most mobilised individuals, who had often taken refuge in the countryside, which allowed the movement to endure.

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[1] Interview with F., in Aleppo, August 2013.
[2] Interview with M. I., in Azaz, December 2012.
[3] Interview with M., in Aleppo, January 2013.

Territorial and sectarian desynchronisation

Confronted with the unanimist nature of the mobilisations, the regime would endeavour to divide the protest moment by playing on local and sectarian differences. To break the links between the regions, the authorities tried to drown the demonstrators' moral and political demands in the "icy waters of selfish calculation". They reactivated their clientelist networks and offered a socio-economic response.

> "When the first demonstrations took place in Azaz, the regime's security services offered to resolve the water supply problems. These had been ongoing for years but suddenly they could be resolved in a matter of days, on condition that parents controlled their children."[1]

The failure of this strategy suggests that the regime did not have any intermediaries in place to demobilise the demonstrators or to initiate a negotiation process. The dissidents in exile did not have any authority over the protestors, while the imams and the heads of influential families were perceived as being close to the regime.[2]

At the same time, the regime endeavoured to make the confrontations a sectarian matter. Through selective violence and the manipulation of antagonisms, from the summer of 2011 the regime attempted to organise the country into different ethno-sectarian spaces and to break the unanimist movement. Bashar al-Assad portrayed the protest movement as a Sunni Arab movement and focused the violence on this population. Conversely, the regime negotiated with those movements whose ideology was specifically identity-based and spared the minority populations.

> "Very early on, the regime sought to isolate our mobilisations. Its strategy was openly to not alienate the support of the minority sectarian communities. For example, in an attempt to calm us, the regime restored the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of 'bidoun' Kurds [Kurdish Syrians who had lost their citizenship during the 1962 census], a demand that we had been making for decades."[3]

Thus, in spring 2011, the regime concluded an agreement with the PYD, the local branch of the PKK in Syria. Through this, the PYD gained effective control of the Kurdish enclaves of Jezireh, in the west of the country, and those of Bestane Qobane and Afrin, as well as the Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo, in exchange for bringing the demonstrators to heel. While the Syrian security forces returned to their barracks, the PKK re-established itself in the Kurdish areas and prevented the young Kurds from participating in the demonstrations.[4]

As in other revolutionary situations (Afghanistan 1979, Libya 2011), the logics of opposition on the basis of sectarianism, with its internal hierarchies, became less effective as a result of individual engagement in the name of universalist ideas. The self-fulfilling prophecy concerning the sectarian nature of the demonstrations only – partially – came true with the protestors' move to violence over the course of 2012. The slogans gradually took on more religious connotations, associated with martyrdom.[5]

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1. Interview with Ab., in Azaz, December 2012.
2. Interview with M. I., in Azaz, December 2012.
3. Interview with Mo., in Erbil, February 2012.
4. See Arthur Quesnay, Cyril Roussel, "Avec qui se battre?".
5. Pierre Centlivres, "Violence légitime et violence illégitime: À propos des pratiques et des représentations dans la crise afghane", *L'Homme*, 37(144), 1997, 51-67.

The effects of the violence

Unable to target the mobilisers and a non-existent organisational structure, the regime sought instead to increase the risks of engagement.[1] The move to increasingly indiscriminate violence arose from this strategy in three ways, with effects which were only partially anticipated.

The regime adapted its repressive economy to address a large-scale movement by systematising torture, a form of individualised violence. The *moukhabarat* tortured the detainees without interrogating them, before releasing them a few weeks later, threatening them and their loved ones if they did not stop demonstrating.[2] Owing to the lack of an identifiable leader, everybody became a target. The absence of discrimination showed that the regime had taken an important step in defining protestors as enemies within, as "terrorists". The extension of the repression was also symbolic: attacks in the mosques signified the lack of a safe haven to the protestors.

Unable to exercise crowd control, the security forces employed extremely brutal methods to disperse protestors, including firing without warning.

> "The use of violence was systematic from the start of the movement: canings as people came out of mosques, or even whilst inside them, knife attacks, and sniper fire into the crowd were commonplace."[3]

As the demonstrations increased, the repressive apparatus operated outside any norms, and relied on militias (*chabiha*) who attacked the protestors.

> "When we left the mosque to flee, the police were ransacking everything. A *chabiha* was cutting down the people in front of me. I saw them fall, one after the other, until the crowd pushed me up against him. At which point he stopped hitting and began to scream – he had lost his mind."[4]

In certain cases, the security forces used ambulances to surprise the demonstrators; the militiamen went into hospitals in order to find the injured. The effect, if not the aim, of this deregulation of violence, was to convince the demonstrators that the repression had no limits.

At a later stage, the regime used the army and the militias collectively to punish the population, thus delineating an enemy territory on the course towards civil war. In the under-administered areas, the few police officers present had to withdraw and the army assumed responsibility for controlling the territory. At the beginning of 2012, columns of armoured vehicles were sent into the countryside in the north of Aleppo, indicating to the populations of these areas that they were now at war with the regime.

This use of violence had two consequences for a protest movement which had explicitly refused to use violence. Firstly, the repression had a ratchet effect on the activists who, hunted by the security services, began covert action.

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[1] Reinoud Leenders, "Repression is 'not a stupid thing': the Syrian regime's response to the uprising", 2012, http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/people/pubs/leenders/repression.pdf (last accessed 23/02/2014).

[2] Regarding the use of torture to demobilise the protestors, see Gilles Dorronsoro, "La torture discrète: capital social, radicalisation et disengagement militant dans un régime sécuritaire", *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [Online], 8, 2008, http://ejts.revues.org/2223 (last accessed 24/02/2014).

[3] Interview with M., in Aleppo, January 2013.

[4] Interview with Ha., in Aleppo, December 2012.

> "From the first demonstrations, some of us began to change accommodation regularly. We slept in the countryside, in villages where the regime had little presence. These villages subsequently became effective meeting points as the regime did not have any means of getting to us, except by way of a large-scale military operation."[1]

The first firearms – pistols, shotguns and, more rarely, Kalashnikovs – appeared in autumn 2011 with the intention of protecting the marches. The first demonstrator deaths created martyrs, furnishing names that were subsequently chanted in the protests. In the absence of any dialogue, the choices were simple: exile or confrontation.

With the militarisation of the repression, entire regions, particularly rural ones, found themselves beyond the reach of the army. Indeed, the army could not sustainably cover the whole Syrian territory. Those areas where there was no daily presence by the repressive apparatus became sanctuaries for the protestors sought by the regime. These protestors, already operating underground, over the 2011-2012 winter formed the core of the first insurgent groups. From that moment, the protest movement embarked on a military course.

Despite the arrival of civil war, peaceful demonstrations continue in areas not controlled by the government. Marches maintain activist ties and perpetuate the spirit of the early movement in the face of armed groups. These demonstrations also allow different political allegiances to differentiate themselves in a context marked by the violence of ideological and military conflict.

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Comparison with other crisis situations shows that the two models used are independent: mobilisation by deliberation could theoretically be sectoral and lead to a situation of fluidity. The originality of the Syrian situation is therefore the combination of mobilisation by deliberation and a polarising crisis.

In fact, the similarities between Syria in 2011, Iran in 1979 and East Germany in 1989 suggest that this model is generalisable. How these events are qualified – "unpredictable", "spontaneous", "unthinkable" – reveal the difficulties of understanding these protests, which do not appear to relate either to rational choice theory or resource mobilisation theory.

As in Leipzig in 1989, groups in which the members knew each other well facilitated the taking of risks and reduced the uncertainty in a non-routine situation, whilst semi-public deliberation contributed to the creation of a collective identity.[2] As in the Iranian and East German cases, the Syrians mobilised because they perceived a political opportunity, which enabled a social movement, in spite of fundamentally unchanged repressive constraints.[3] In Syria, the "Arab Spring" triggered a process of deliberation within small groups and on social networks, in which the values, objectives and the sociability of the participants were lastingly transformed. The Syrians who took to the streets on 18 March 2011 were thus individuals who were both hyper-calculating and deeply engaged morally and emotionally.

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1. Interview with S. Y., in Azaz, December 2012.
2. Steven Pfaff, "Collective identity and formal groups in revolutionary mobilisations: East Germany in 1989", *Social Forces*, 75(1), 1996, 91-118.
3. Charles Kurzman, "Structural opportunity and perceived opportunity in social movement theory: the Iranian Revolution of 1979", *American Sociological Review*, 61, 1996, 153-70.

Confronted with the demonstrations, the regime made strategic use of the crisis, turning it into an armed struggle in order to impose itself in the face of peaceful protests. In response, the protestors progressively radicalised, creating parallel institutions, and thus finding themselves caught up in a dynamic of armed conflict, the culmination of which was civil war. Ultimately, the Syrian revolution has proven to be very different from the Tunisian, Egyptian and Yemeni revolutions, and quite similar to the Libyan situation. Gaddafi had effectively installed an institutional system which was deliberately highly embryonic and under his direct control. Fearing *coups d'état*, the repressive apparatus was more diffuse and less institutionalised.[1] Furthermore, as in Syria, the protests that began in February 2011 did not have any institutional support and the regime responded with violence. Conversely, the situation in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, where a multisectoral protest movement emerged, revealed itself to be fluid, and resulted in the de-objectification of the institutions and the end of collusive transactions.[2] In Egypt and Tunisia, the army refused to open fire on the protestors (as did part of the army in Yemen), provoking the fall of the regime.

Lastly, the Syrian crisis shows the difficulty in moving from the absence of protest to the hypothesis of a consented domination. Thus, the transgressive acts – derision, diversion and escapism – that Lisa Wedeen identifies in the 1980s and 1990s, and which are also found under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad, rarely lead to active opposition.[3] One might therefore assume that the regime had managed to naturalise its existence and that the population, in the end, co-produced the power that subjugated it. The mechanisms by which the regime penetrated society, notably *décharge*, have been described in other contexts and gave the impression of a stabilised system.[4] However, ruptures such as those represented by the Arab revolutions show on the contrary that the acceptance of authoritarian systems is fragile, even non-existent. Under certain conditions, "hidden transcripts" can become public discourse.[5] The absence of mobilisation before 2011 probably indicates that individuals expected any protest movement to fail, which acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. But let this calculation once change, and revolution begins.[6]

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[1] Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] See Amin Allal, "Trajectoires 'révolutionnaires' en Tunisie: processus de radicalisation politique 2007-2011", *Revue française de science politique*, 62(5-6), 2012, 821-42; Youssef El Chazli, "Sur les sentiers de la révolution: comment des Égyptiens 'dépolitisés' sont-ils devenus révolutionnaires?", *Revue française de science politique*, 62(5-6), 2012, 843-66; Laurent Bonnefoy, Marine Poirier, "La structuration de la révolution yéménite: essai d'analyse d'un processus en marche", *Revue française de science politique*, 62(5-6), 2012, 895-913.

[3] Lisa Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). The same phenomenon was also to be found in Eastern bloc countries in the 1970s: see Jay Rowell, *Le totalitarisme au concret: Les politiques du logement en RDA* (Paris: Economica, 2006).

[4] Béatrice Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination: une économie politique comparée des régimes autoritaires* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

[5] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[6] We would like to thank Patrick Haenni, Felix Legrand, Thomas Pierret and the anonymous reviewers of the *RFSP* for their comments on the different versions of this article.

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