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Narrating Crisis, Constructing Policy: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in Syria

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ABSTRACT

During crises, ideas play a decisive role in shaping radical paradigm shifts in economic governance. However, not all crises immediately produce such 'great transformations'. Why do some ideas result in *incremental* rather than abrupt change after crisis? To identify mechanisms potentially explaining this variation, I conduct an exploratory process tracing of an understudied case of incremental institutional change: post-independence Syria. Competing political actors in Syria converged on identical policy responses to crisis despite their very different interpretations of its causes. Although power oscillated between these increasingly bitter rivals in the early 1950s, their ideational consensus on economic issues nevertheless led to a decade of steady institutional change that transformed previously fragile government institutions into powerful vehicles of statism. I derive from this analysis the potential causal significance of two new variables – *crisis narrative* and *crisis response* – and hypothesise that their configuration can explain variation in post-crisis patterns of institutional change. Ideas can explain not only the new direction of economic governance after crisis, but also the speed and scale of its movement.

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Introduction

For almost nine decades following the Great Depression, scholars have sought to explain how and why crises produce shifts of seismic magnitude in the relationship between state, society, and economy (Polanyi 1944). During episodes of crisis, familiar policy instruments prove ineffective, old certainties are overturned, and new opportunities for innovation appear. Crises thus clear a space in which radically new paradigms of economic governance can be adopted, such as Keynesianism after the Second World War (Hall 1989), neoliberalism in the 1970s (Prasad 2006), or austerity after the 2008 financial crash (Blyth 2013).

Many sociologists and political scientists observe that the direction of these outcomes is not a foregone conclusion, but is contingent upon the specific ideas adopted by actors as they navigate the storms of crisis (Gourevitch 1986, McNamara 1998, Campbell 2001, Blyth 2002, Widmaier *et al.* 2007, Abdelal *et al.* 2010). 'Ideas', Mark Blyth (2002: 11) argues, 'allow agents to reduce uncertainty, propose a particular solution to a moment of crisis, and empower agents to resolve that crisis by constructing new institutions in line with these new ideas'. Given its over-determined nature, Blyth suggests, crisis can never be definitively or objectively defined. Actors therefore adopt different interpretive frameworks to elaborate competing causal accounts of the crisis, and consequently advocate different measures to resolve it. The aftermath of crisis is determined not by a battle over actors'

material interests, but by a battle between rival interpretations of the nature of the crisis (Hay 1996, Blyth 2003). Economic ideas can therefore explain these radical and abrupt changes in economic institutions and policies that occur in the wake of crisis.

While these seismic shifts in political economy have been well studied, not every crisis produces such great transformations. In this article, in contrast, I examine that category of crisis which does not immediately produce a paradigm shift, but instead sets in motion a series of *incremental* policy changes. This category of institutional change has received considerable attention from historical institutionalists (Streeck and Thelen 2005a, Mahoney and Thelen 2010a), who have studied the 'subtle and gradual ways' in which 'slow and piecemeal' endogenous changes can fundamentally alter systems over time (Mahoney and Thelen 2010b: 4). However, scholars have yet to develop an ideational explanation of why some crises lead to change that is implemented incrementally rather than abruptly.

My article seeks to fill this lacuna by constructing a new theory of variation in post-crisis transformation. The first stage of the theory-building process is to identify mechanisms that might potentially explain the varying outcomes of crisis. Process tracing provides a powerful tool for the discovery of new variables that do not feature in existing theories (Mahoney 2015: 217). I therefore adopt this method to analyse historical evidence from post-independence Syria (1946–1958) as a case of incremental change after crisis. My analysis identifies the potential causal significance of two key factors: (i) *crisis narrative* and (ii) *crisis response*. In post-independence Syria, the national bourgeoisie and the military defined the crisis facing the country in starkly different terms. They nevertheless agreed that policies of agricultural and industrial statism offered the best response. This configuration of narratives and solutions produced what Bruno Palier (2005) has called an 'ambiguous agreement', where two parties converge on the same policy agenda for very different reasons. Although political power oscillated between the bourgeoisie and the army in the early 1950s, their ambiguous agreement meant that minor policy changes implemented by each actor cumulatively produced a transformation that gave the state unprecedented capabilities of economic intervention.

In the second stage of the theory-building process, I use insights from the Syrian case to develop a generalisable model of post-crisis institutional change. I hypothesise that the explanatory potential of the variables of crisis definition and crisis response is not limited to cases of incremental change after crisis. Instead, these varying ideational configurations may also explain why other crises result in abrupt change, and even why some crises produce no change at all. As such, the model has the potential to explain the full range of empirical outcomes – different varieties of institutional change as well as institutional continuity – that follow the outbreak of crisis.

My argument makes three principal contributions to current debates. First, the case study of Syria illustrates that ideational institutional analysis can and should be applied to cases beyond advanced industrial democracies. Cases from the Middle East, in particular, are surprisingly rare in both historical institutionalism and international political economy, but hold rich and often untapped insights for theory building. In contrast, the literature on the Middle East typically overlooks economic ideas in favour of structural, class-based explanations. My article thus presents ideational analysis to regional specialists as an alternative line of inquiry. Second, by focusing on a case of radical post-crisis change that is incremental rather than abrupt, I expand the scope of the existing scholarship on economic ideas and institutional transformations. Third, I not only use post-independence Syria as a theory-generating case to identify the causal mechanisms behind this particular outcome of crisis, but expand on these insights to develop a generalisable theory of institutional response in the aftermath of crisis. Ideas inform not only the direction of post-crisis change, but also the speed and scale of its movement.

Toward a new model of post-crisis institutional change

As we have seen, ideational explanations of institutional change mostly focus on dramatic shifts from one economic paradigm to another (Hay 2001, Berman 2006). From this perspective, crises are

significant not for what they reveal about the workings of the political economy, but for their ability to interrupt pre-existing institutional continuities and create decisive moments in which institutional trajectories can be transformed (Krasner 1984, Mahoney 2000, Kerr 2002, Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). For this reason, historical institutionalists are more interested in the critical junctures that punctuate periods of institutional equilibrium, rather than crises *per se*.

However, this model of institutional change depends on clear-cut distinction between stability and disruption that rarely obtains in the real world (Streeck and Thelen 2005b). Alternatively, minor incremental adjustments that seem individually insignificant can accumulate to collectively produce a 'tipping point' of substantial proportions. To capture the various possible modalities of institutional change, Streeck and Thelen distinguish between 'processes of change' (which may be *abrupt* or *incremental*) and 'results of change' (which may be *continuous* or *discontinuous*) (see Table 1).

The crisis outcome most often studied – where an economic paradigm shift produces abrupt, discontinuous change – falls into the bottom-right cell of the grid, 'Breakdown and Replacement'. In contrast, cases of incremental, discontinuous change following crisis – such as post-independence Syria – would fall into category of 'Gradual Transformation'. Crises can also produce two further outcomes: incremental continuous changes that do not accumulate to reach the tipping point ('Reproduction by Adaptation') or a superficial flurry of change that has no significant impact ('Survival and Return').

The seismic shifts between economic paradigms that feature in the bottom-right cell are, by their very nature, relatively easy candidates for ideational explanation. Yet if ideas have any explanatory power, they should also be able to account for those cases where crises are followed by less abrupt or less radical change, or, on the contrary, by institutional continuity. These other varieties of post-crisis institutional development present a more difficult conundrum for ideational accounts. How can ideas explain not merely the substantive content of pioneering initiatives in economic governance, but also varying degrees and speeds of change such as gradual transformation, reproduction by adaptation, or survival and return?

My process tracing of the case of post-independence Syria identifies two factors that potentially explain this variation in outcome: (i) *crisis narratives* and (ii) *crisis responses*. My premise is that the structural characteristics of a particular crisis itself do not determine any subsequent institutional outcomes. Indeed, my argument itself is agnostic about whether crises are caused by exogenous shocks, endogenous contradictions, or systemic disequilibria; it does not offer any *a priori* definition of what a crisis actually is. Instead, I cleave to an earlier, more classical definition of crisis as that crucial turning point which necessitates action to avoid catastrophic failure (Koselleck 2006). 'Crises' thus emerge into being when actors identify that a series of seemingly discrete problems, challenges, or malfunctions are actually symptoms of a single underlying pathology.¹ As Colin Hay (1999: 324) observes,

[t]here is no simple correspondence between crisis as a narrative of systemic failure on the one hand and the nature of the contradictions and 'symptoms' of failure recruited to a crisis narrative on the other. [...] A set of failures can support and sustain a multitude of competing, indeed mutually incompatible, narratives of crisis.

This possibility of incompatible diagnoses is essential to my theory of variation in post-crisis institutional change. To be clear, I do not argue that crises are 'merely' free-floating linguistic constructions. Much the same way as categories such as race or ethnicity are produced discursively and reproduced materially and institutionally, so too is crisis no less 'real' for being narratively constructed. My theory of crisis is *social*, not subjective.

Table 1. Types of institutional change: processes and results.

		Result of change	
		Continuity	Discontinuity
Process of change	Incremental	'Reproduction by adaptation'	'Gradual transformation'
	Abrupt	'Survival and return'	'Breakdown and replacement'

Source: Streeck and Thelen (2005b: 9).

The first variable in my model, *crisis narratives*, appears when actors propose that failures are not as isolated incidents but components of a single conjunction of actors, events, and forces. Crisis narratives present forceful claims that may relate to blame and responsibility, but also imply a particular position regarding the constitution of the social world and the nature of causality. As such, crisis narratives fall into the category of what John L. Campbell (2001: 389) has called paradigmatic ideas: that is, ‘underlying theoretical and ontological assumptions about how the world works’ that ‘define the terrain of policy discourse’. While paradigms are often associated with the formal discourses of rival economic schools, crisis narratives need not be scientific, mathematical, or even logical so long as their premises are inter-subjectively plausible.

The second variable, *crisis responses*, refers to the specific policy instruments that actors select to surmount the crisis once its contours have been narrated. These responses must be consistent with the overall paradigm in which the crisis narrative is articulated, but cannot automatically be ‘read off’ from a specific discursive construction. Crisis solutions are effectively autonomous from the overarching crisis narrative. Crisis responses correspond to programmatic ideas: ‘technical and professional ideas that [...] prescribe a precise course of policy action’ (Campbell 2001: 386). Although ostensibly neutral technologies, crisis responses are rooted in a particular social ontology and embody a particular understanding of cause-and-effect.

The scholarship on post-crisis economic change tends to assume that incommensurable crisis narratives necessarily entail incommensurable solutions. In post-2008 Britain, for example, the financial crash might be characterised either as a collapse of the private sector (from which the need for counter-cyclical public spending is deduced) or as a product of profligate government spending (for which the solution of public sector austerity is prescribed) (Blyth 2013). Logically speaking, it cannot be both.

However, there is no reason why this outcome should always obtain. By differentiating between crisis narrative and crisis response, three other options logically present themselves. First, actors may diagnose the pathology of the crisis differently, but nevertheless converge upon the same policy prescriptions. Second, actors may agree on the nature of the crisis, but disagree over specific solutions. Third, actors might agree on both crisis definition and response. Each of the four possible combinations of paradigmatic and programmatic ideas is likely, I suggest, to lead to different processes of institutional change and produce different results (see Table 2).

The bottom-right cell of the grid corresponds to the abrupt change leading to paradigm shift that is most often studied by scholars of crisis. In these cases of ‘Breakdown and Replacement’ (to reprise the terms of Streeck and Thelen 2005b), actors espouse paradigmatic and programmatic ideas that are both incommensurable. An insurgent victory – such as that of monetarism over Keynesianism in 1970s Britain – may then bring about a radical shift in economic governance (Hay 2001). In cases where actors adopt different crisis narratives but propose the same solutions – such as post-independence Syria – I hypothesise that cumulative incremental changes are likely to have far-reaching consequences, leading to the outcome of Gradual Transformation (top-right cell). Here, the consensus over crisis responses produces an ideal environment for the uncontested introduction of new policies, the expansion of existing institutions, or the extension of state capabilities that collectively reshape the terrain of governance. The third possibility, where narratives and responses converge (top-left cell), is likely to result in incremental change without systemic transformation. The case of US macroeconomic policy post-2008 is a good example of this category (Baker 2015). Finally, actors adopting the same crisis narratives yet different solutions make possible the outcome of overall continuity despite a rapid pace of institutional change (‘Survival and Return’, bottom-left cell).

Table 2. Types of institutional change by configuration of crisis narrative and response.

		Narratives	
		Agree	Disagree
Responses	Agree	Incremental continuity	Incremental discontinuity
	Disagree	Abrupt continuity	Abrupt discontinuity

In the following sections, I undertake a process tracing of institutional change in post-crisis Syria that draws on empirical evidence including government archives, memoirs, newspapers, economic bulletins, and military publications. In undertaking *theory-building* rather than *case-oriented* process tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2013), my aim is to identify (not test) the causal mechanisms that potentially explain the novel outcome of incremental discontinuity.

Theory building on the basis of process tracing a single case has several limitations. First, my model is a logical extrapolation of the potential impacts of variables identified as causally significant in a case study of just one of the four potential outcomes represented in the grid. My hypothesis – that different configurations of crisis narrative and response may account for variation in post-crisis institutional change – therefore requires further empirical research to substantiate. However, this level of explanation is less a shortcoming of process tracing than it is the very objective of the method. Process tracing is useful not only for the ideographic purpose of explaining a single case: more importantly, process tracing can identify new variables overlooked in existing accounts and propose potential causal mechanisms to open new avenues for empirical investigation. Achieving that goal is precisely this article's contribution to the literature on economic ideas and institutional change.

Process-tracing crisis outcomes: the case of post-independence Syria

Syria (1946–1958) is a case of post-crisis institutional change that is incrementally radical. The intensely contested political terrain of Syria during these years provides an ideal test case upon which to test the significance of economic ideas. After its liberal oligarchy was overthrown by a coup in 1949, Syria suffered years of political instability as power alternated between the national bourgeoisie and the left-leaning military. There were two further coups in 1949 alone, followed by a formal restoration of civilian government until 1951, when a military regime was installed that lasted until 1954. Despite these vicissitudes, disagreements between the national bourgeoisie and the military primarily revolved around political issues, especially foreign policy (Torrey 1964, Rathmell 2013). On economic policy, in contrast, there was surprising consensus: the bourgeoisie and the military adopted similar policy prescriptions despite their diverging crisis narratives. In the course of the 1950s, Syria slowly but surely laid the foundations for a specific form of statism, based on economic protectionism, the encouragement of light industry, distrust of an independent private sector, and horizontal integration. By the end of that decade, the Syrian state had been radically re-orientated and bore little resemblance to the dysfunctional, incapacitated apparatus that had existed just 10 years earlier.

Syria's turn to statism might appear typical of mid-twentieth century developing countries in general. However, there are significant differences between local varieties of statism. Latin American 'national populism' also adopted a model of import-substituting industrialisation, for example. Yet Brazil and Chile were open to international capital, supported private sector activity, focused on heavy industry, and integrated vertically (Sikkink 1991) – the precise opposite of Syrian statism. The East Asian developmental state, in contrast, was characterised by technocratic institutions insulated from political pressure (Johnson 1982), features notably absent from the polarised partisanship of the Syrian bureaucracy in the 1950s. In contrast to more commonly studied cases from the Middle East such as Egypt (Waterbury 1983), Syrian statism was not imposed unilaterally by a single authoritarian regime, but was constructed in sedimented fashion by successive governments of very different class backgrounds and ideological agenda.

The different varieties of statism in the developing world present a challenge to rational institutionalism, which typically explain such instances of policy consensus in terms of a 'social pact' or 'class compromise' – in the Syrian case, between the rising forces of the left (with its power base in the military, peasantry, and workers) and the national bourgeoisie (which accepted state regulation of its economic activity in exchange for the cultivation of a domestic consumer base) (Hinnebusch 1990, Heydemann 1999, Waldner 1999). But by explaining consensus in terms of a compromise between competing material interests, such accounts cannot account for the precise *content* of

that consensus. Why should the Syrian military and the bourgeoisie advocate state coordination of a vertically consolidated private sector, closure to international capital, and an emphasis on light industry, rather than any combination of policies taken up by other statist economies in the developing world?

The answer to this question can be found in the crisis narratives and crisis solutions that were available to particular actors during a specific episode of crisis. Historical research reveals that Syrian actors did not devise accounts using formal economic theory (unlike their counterparts in Palestine (Seikaly 2015), Lebanon (Gaspard 2003), or Latin America (Sikkink 1991), for example). The autobiographies and memoirs of Syrian bourgeois politicians suggest that their preference for statist solutions came from first-hand practical experience and collective understandings elaborated and reinforced in the course of daily business dealings from the late 1920s to the 1940s (Ḥaffār 1954, Ḥakīm 1965, al-'Azm 1973, Ḥannā 1987). As I shall detail, the Syrian consensus on statism emerged well *before* similar ideas of state regulation and planning reached them through international channels such as the World Bank, Soviet aid, and Third World nationalism in the mid-1950s. The international circulation of statist ideas no doubt reinforced their appeal, but local Syrian actors had already articulated their variety of statism in response to earlier crises. These crisis narratives and crisis responses enable us to explain specific patterns of institutional development in cases such as Syria, rather than merely specify the conditions in which those outcomes development can take place.

From failures to crisis narratives

Conventional historiographical accounts attribute Syria's political crisis following independence to its poor performance in the 1948 war with Israel, which prompted military intervention against civilian rule (Seale 1986). However, the historical evidence shows that contemporary actors began a narrative of crisis two years earlier, as soon as the liberal nationalist government led by President Shukri al-Quwwatli inherited power from France in 1946. Quwwatli's party represented the modern, secular wing of the urban elites of Damascus and Aleppo, which had adopted a non-violent policy of 'honourable cooperation' with the colonial power after earlier uprisings against the occupation had been violently crushed (Khoury 1987, Neep 2012). Quwwatli's inability to manage economic and political tensions previously checked by colonial occupation provided the backdrop for powerful narratives of crisis to emerge.

Syria's economic downturn began with the sudden withdrawal of foreign troops in 1946. During the Second World War, the Allied occupation had provided a huge stimulus to the economy (Chaitani 2007: 95), injecting hard currency that provoked rampant inflation and undermined living standards (Helbaoui 1956: 72). Conversely, a few Syrian merchants amassed fortunes as they manipulated the rationing system introduced by the Middle East Supply Centre, established by Britain to prevent mass starvation across the region (Wilmington 1971). 1946 was marked by severe inflation, frequent strikes, and shortages of basic foodstuffs.

Upon independence, the institutional capacities of the Syrian state were woefully insufficient to manage this cascade of economic issues. This under-development was not straightforwardly a reflection of the relatively recent creation of 'Syria' as a political entity in 1920. Indeed, the late-nineteenth century had seen the infrastructural expansion of the Ottoman state into new realms such as education, communications, taxation, and land registration (Ma'oz 1968, Kayali 1997). Yet in Syria, Ottoman efforts at building a centralised state apparatus did not penetrate much further than the main urban centres, where they were easily colonised by local elites (Schatkowski Schilcher 1985). Under French rule, for purposes of divide-and-conquer Syria was sub-divided into shifting mini-state jurisdictions, the formal institutions of which were undermined by a parallel system of colonial officials who held real power. State budgets were overwhelmingly devoted to security and administration. Syria had no state industrial policy, but was a captive export market for French manufacturers (Schad 2001). Colonial agricultural policy failed in its efforts to create a new class of smallholders loyal

to French rule, to expand cotton cultivation, or even to complete a comprehensive cadastral survey of Syria (Asfour 1959). Not until the Second World War did Syrian agriculture receive any institutional support: the Allies created a Wheat and Cereals Office, which held a monopoly over collecting and distributing wheat (Vitalis and Heydemann 2000). (This office was later absorbed into the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, which was itself only created in 1947.) Twenty-six years after the borders of Syria had first been sketched on the map, the reach of state institutions within those borders was still highly circumscribed. State infrastructural power was effectively confined to a narrow strip of territory stretching from Aleppo in the north to Damascus in the south, hardly penetrating the rural peripheries or the coast, much less the distant northeast.

In addition to a state apparatus that lacked expertise or personnel, Quwwatli's government lacked any coherent economic programme. Legislation was passed inconsistently, as if parliamentary deputies were 'feathers caught in the winds of a storm', as one leading Syrian commentator said (Sharif 1947: 3). The government announced import and export restrictions to deal with high prices and profiteering, but this policy was undermined by the fact that France had joined Syria and Lebanon in a single market, which meant merchants in Beirut could easily circumvent customs policies declared in Damascus (Chaitani 2007). The state-run wheat monopoly was attacked for keeping prices artificially high to increase tax revenue for the state, rather than maintaining availability. Quwwatli himself was accused of corruption, nepotism, and patronage for personal gain (Kurd 'Alī 1951: 906–9). Critics clamoured that state institutions were riddled by the private interests of the elite (al-Rayyis 1969: 405, al-'Azm 1973: 185).

The already fragile state apparatus was especially vulnerable in its peripheries. The commander of the Syrian gendarmerie warned that his forces were 'in a state of profound decline and ill-discipline, [...] close to anarchy in every area'.² Officers did not know where their men were, gendarmes did not know the names of their unit, the administration had stopped paying salaries, weapons had gone missing, and rural insecurity was rife. The territorial reach of the central state was particularly tenuous in geographical areas that held dense concentrations of ethno-religious groups (Rabinovich 1979). The most prominent Druze family of southern Syria reasserted the region's autonomy from Damascus, while several Alawi tribal leaders went into outright rebellion in the coastal hills (Bābil 1987: 282–6, 'Uthmān 2004: 117–42).

Geopolitics added new dimensions to these domestic issues. Quwwatli feared Transjordanian plans to erase colonial borders and establish a new kingdom of 'Greater Syria' under its own leadership (Arslān 1994: 121–2).³ Indeed, Syria's participation in the 1948 war with Israel was motivated more by Quwwatli's desire to prevent Transjordan making a land grab than it was concern for Palestine (Landis 2001). Quwwatli was suspicious of the loyalty of the Syrian armed forces, and neglected to reform the army or equip it for war. This oversight resulted in Syria's ignominious military performance against the newly founded State of Israel (al-'Azm 1973: 182, Seale 1986: 42, Arslān 1994: 125, 206, 218).

This final failure of 1948 led to Quwwatli's overthrow the following year, when army officers staged a coup to end what they regarded as civilian incompetence (Fanṣah 1982). By this point, Syria's litany of post-independence failures – the economic downturn, corruption, nepotism, institutional breakdown, provincial rebellions, and geopolitical intrusions – had been assembled into powerful overarching narratives of an ongoing crisis afflicting the country. These narratives were voiced by two key sets of actors: military officers and the national bourgeoisie, between whom power oscillated for several years following Quwwatli's ouster. Although both groups adopted different causal accounts of the crisis, they nevertheless agreed on a common set of policy solutions to resolve it. In the following sections, I elaborate these narratives of crisis.

The national bourgeoisie

To construct meaningful crisis narratives, actors often draw on lessons learned from past experience that are available as part of the collective 'historical imagination' (Samman 2015). Syria's national

bourgeoisie similarly narrated the post-independence crisis in light of their reading of three specific historical episodes: (i) the difficulties they had faced establishing modern industry under French rule; (ii) the negative impact of colonial economic policy; and (iii) the problems of speculation and profiteering during the Second World War.

Syria's modern industry originated in the 1920s and was closely associated with the urban anti-colonial nationalist movement. The early industrialists who founded new ventures in areas such as textiles, food processing, and cement saw no contradiction between their political and business interests. On the contrary, they considered national economic development imperative to ensure meaningful independence from foreign rule (Ḥaffār 1954, al-'Azm 1973, Khoury 1988). Because the traditional elite preferred to squirrel away its wealth in land or gold, these modernising industrialists created the very first share-holding companies as a vehicle to pool scarce capital, having witnessed the earlier success of joint stock ventures in Egypt.

The worldwide depression of the 1930s affected Syria as the Syrian currency was pegged to the French franc; the situation worsened with the collapse of markets for Syrian cotton and silk exports, and the increasing competition between local products and cheaper imports from France, Japan, and Zionist settlements in Palestine (Helbaoui 1956: 65–8, Shimizu 1985). Syrian businessmen consequently lobbied France for tariff reforms to protect their nascent enterprises (Burns and Edwards 1936).

The dangers of excessive competition had been further underlined by the speculative activities that in Syria subverted Britain's attempt to coordinate food distribution in the eastern Mediterranean during the Second World War (Vitalis and Heydemann 2000). Local merchants' rapacious profiteering was widely interpreted as the consequence of an unscrupulous capitalism – 'free and entirely unfettered', in the words of a prominent commentator, 'that only seeks to increase its profit at the expense of workers and consumers' (Sharif 1947: 90, cf. Gibb 1947: 129). In the light of these experiences, the Syrian national bourgeoisie interpreted post-independence failures as the result of uncontrolled economic activity: the leading *Alif Bā'* newspaper described Syria's crisis of anarchy as unparalleled anywhere else on the planet.⁴

Promulgating a crisis narrative of disorder, anarchy, and unfettered competition created a discursive terrain that favoured crisis responses promising predictability, strategic planning, and coordination. As such, the national bourgeoisie advocated essentially statist policies. Two main bourgeois parties emerged after independence: the National Party (*al-Hizb al-Watani*, largely representing the elite of Damascus) and the People's Party (*Hizb al-Sha'b*, strongest in the second city of Aleppo). Each party's founding charter, announced in 1947 and 1948 respectively, expressed commitment to the principles of what was called the 'guided economy' [*al-iqtisād al-muwajjah*] (Anon 1954: 166–8, 196–7).

The 'guided economy' model placed specific demands on the state: (i) to protect Syrian producers from external competition; (ii) to coordinate economic activity and investment according to objective, 'scientific' criteria; (iii) and to launch publically owned companies if the private sector was too weak. To support the nation's small and medium industries, the parties further committed to (iv) building the domestic consumer base, which remained necessarily limited in an economy dominated by large landowners and an impoverished, exploited peasantry that lived in conditions of near-feudalism. Although the traditional land-owning notability had vetoed any talk of redistribution during the French occupation (Ḥannā 1978: 222–30), the modernising national bourgeoisie now put the issues of state-led land reform firmly on the agenda. The peasants of the past, after all, were the consumers of the future. Consensus over the need for a guided economy was so solid that bourgeois politicians enshrined its principles in the 1950 Constitution, committing all future Syrian governments to progressive statism (Khadduri 1951, Quzmakhūrī 1989: 259–71).

The military

In the Second World War, units of locally recruited French forces had risen up in support of the nationalist movement and subsequently formed the nucleus of the post-independence armed forces.

Observers often note that colonial preferences for recruiting from Syria's ethnic and religious minorities provided the vehicle for the political ascent of Alawis, who later formed the core of the Ba'th regime that exists to this day (Seale 1986). However, this is only true for the rank-and-file: under French rule the officer corps was primarily comprised of Sunnis and Christians (Bou-Nacklie 1993). The proportion of Sunnis admitted to the military academy increased even further after independence (Drysdale 1982). These officers were mostly drawn from the lower middle or traditional middle class rather than the bourgeoisie.

Syria's first coup took place in 1949 and installed its first military regime, which barely lasted five months (al-'Azm 1973: 186–9, Faṅṣah 1982). The armed forces were riven by factionalism until General Adib al-Shishakli purged his opponents and consolidated control. Yet during this time, the army developed a distinctive narrative of the crisis facing the country. Much like the national bourgeoisie, the armed forces characterised the crisis in terms of its rampant anarchy, but in their narrative this disorder was fundamentally *social* rather than economic.

Military magazines and journals in the late 1940s and 1950s reveal deep-seated, recurrent worries about social anarchy afflicting both soldiers and civilians. Textual analysis of official publications such as *al-Jundī* ('The Soldier'), *al-Majalla al-'Askariya* ('The Military Journal'), and *al-Shurṭa wa'l-Amn al-'Āmm* ('Police and General Security') reveals repeated concerns that the end of French rule had delivered a freedom without restrictions that was not liberty, but anarchy [*fawḍā*]. Anarchy, one author suggested, causes 'uncertainty, confusion, and confrontation in the lives of individuals and the nation'.⁵ Social disorder had infected the military, which was a microcosm of the Syrian people.⁶ Officers who jumped the line at the cinema, or army drivers who ignored traffic lights, were failing the need for *nizām* (order, discipline, regimentation) just as much as if they had refused direct orders.⁷ According to this narrative, Syria's crisis of anarchy could only be solved by discipline.

Once army officers came into power, they sought to address the crisis through the disciplinary policies of coordination, control, and intervention that the national bourgeoisie had long advocated. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the military's support for these policies was rooted in a social rather than economic understanding of the crisis. Nevertheless, this tactical convergence over crisis response meant that incremental change could take place in Syria without being infected by the overt political rivalry between civilian politicians and military officers that characterised the 1950s.

Incremental institutional change

After 1949, the armed forces temporarily withdrew to the barracks and allowed the national bourgeoisie to govern Syria under their watchful eye. However, arguments between the two bourgeois parties prevented civilian governments from developing the institutional capabilities needed to overcome the still-unresolved crisis. Civilian politicians were consequently unable to weather the economic storm that hit Syria when the 1951 harvest failed. Three successive governments fell after failing to agree a national budget, while strikes by civil servants paralysed the bureaucracy (Ḥakīm 1965: 57–63). Unwisely, the People's Party chose this moment to challenge the veto power that the armed forces had been wielding over civilian politics, prompting a coup in November 1951 that inaugurated over two years of direct military rule. Under the leadership of Adib al-Shishakli, more coherent policies were implemented to address the ongoing crisis, in particular to mitigate the effects of the failed harvest. As these policies conformed to both bourgeois and military diagnoses, both sets of actors were in broad albeit ambiguous agreement. Despite their political acrimony, neither one reversed incremental institutional changes introduced by their rivals.

The 1951 harvest failure was the real catalyst for the introduction of statism. Periodic harvest failure was not uncommon, thanks to erratic rainfall and inadequate irrigation. Given that agriculture comprised an estimated 45 per cent of the national income, tax receipts could fluctuate wildly from year to year, which undermined the viability of the state itself (IBRD 1955: 9). The negative impact of the 1951 harvest failure was further exacerbated by the end of the post-war agricultural boom.

In the late 1940s, entrepreneurs based in Aleppo introduced cotton cultivation to the fertile, untapped lands of the Jezira region in northeast Syria. By investing in irrigation, tractors, and combine harvesters, commercial agriculturalists boosted yields dramatically. In 1950, Syrians cultivated 78,000 hectares of cotton and profited hugely from the global hike in cotton prices caused by the Korean War. Believing a third world war to be on its way, agriculturalists looked forward to a repeat of the staggering profits they had accumulated during their last wartime experience. Syrian industrialists hiked factory production to meet the anticipated surge in demand,⁸ while not just agriculturalists but also doctors, professionals, and even civil servants began to invest in cotton, hoping to take advantage of the boom.⁹ In just one year cotton cultivation expanded nearly threefold, to 217,000 hectares (Meyer 1959: 37, Warriner 1962: 71–2). Disastrously the harvest failed, thanks to a drought, insect infestations, and over-reach by speculators without technical expertise in cotton cultivation. The repercussions rippled across the whole country.

In 1952, the new military government implemented a raft of statist policies that both responded to the bourgeoisie's calls for a guided economy and fulfilled the military's need for a disciplined society. Syrian businessmen blamed the harvest failure on unfettered competition and uncoordinated market activity, in line with their narrative of the ongoing crisis. They therefore supported the same regulatory responses that the military envisaged as bringing order to an unruly polity. The Shishakli regime announced a reform package, the Program for Workers and Peasants, to bring overhaul agricultural and industrial policy with the establishment of new state agencies, institutional capabilities, and powers of regulation.

First, new checks and procedures were introduced to ensure that a giddy over-extension of private sector speculation could never be repeated. Permits were now required from the Ministry of National Economy before a new company could be incorporated; existing factories could not be expanded without official approval. The Ministry standardised book-keeping requirements and obliged businesses to submit an array of facts and figures to the government (providing data useful to produce meaningful national statistics). The Ministry was given extensive powers to regulate domestic trade with the aim of ending what the Chamber of Commerce of Aleppo described as the 'anarchy of prices'.¹⁰ Protectionist measures were expanded: the government doubled the import duty on goods that competed with Syrian manufacturing, banned the export of important yet scarce materials such as metal and fertilisers, and granted customs exceptions for industrial machinery and building materials. Businesses were granted a six-year tax holiday on income from real estate ('Arūdki 1972: 312–4, Sadowski 1984: 221).

Second, the state acquired new powers of supervision and control in the agricultural domain. A Cotton Office was established in 1952 to distribute seed, supply pesticide, determine the extent of cotton cultivation, determine planting and harvesting seasons, and regulate exports. Egyptian experts were brought in to run this new office. Meanwhile, the state-run Agricultural Bank was empowered to provide loans to medium as well as large landowners for the first time, and given responsibility to import and distribute tractors, irrigation pumps, and other machinery needed to stimulate agricultural production (Silū 1952: 27–33). These small steps broke new ground. The large landowners of Damascus and Aleppo had long resisted any state intrusion into agriculture, which was the source of their vast financial as well as social power. Under military rule, agriculture had become a valid object of state intervention.

Third, the Shishakli regime announced plans for land reform. This agenda was designed by Akram al-Hawrani, a firebrand activist, childhood friend, and now political advisor to Shishakli. Hawrani was a vocal proponent of peasant rights, having mobilised impoverished tenant farmers to take direct action against landowners and organised a three day 'Rally against Feudalism' attended by as many as 40,000 peasants in Aleppo in September 1951 (Khayyir 1996). However, land reform was not only supported by the newly emerging Syrian left; it was also favoured by the national bourgeoisie, which envisaged raising peasants out of poverty to provide a new consumer base for the products of national industry. The national bourgeoisie had advocated land reform from at least as early as 1947, well before the peasantry erupted onto the political scene in 1951. The Syrian

bourgeoisie thus advocated land reform not as a strategic concession to these new class actors, but a solution to their diagnosis of the crisis.

Shishakli planned significant changes to land tenure: Law 96 of 1952 curtailed large landowners' rights to claim unregistered land that formally and empowered the state to confiscate landholdings in excess of 50 or 150 hectares (depending on the region) for redistribution to the peasantry (Silū 1952: 49–51). This law was a radical assertion of the state's right to regulate the most crucial source of power for the traditional urban elite. Yet in practice the law floundered on the inadequacy of state institutions to deliver such substantive change. The process of cadastral mapping begun by the French had halted in 1943, still incomplete; there was no record of where these unclaimed state lands were, or of which lands had been claimed by landowners. Furthermore, the right of landowners to claim this land had not been included in the 1949 Civil Code that had overhauled the Syrian legal system after independence. These administrative shortcomings meant that landowners were operating in a legal grey zone, inside which land was effectively invisible to the state apparatus. In response, the government reactivated the cadastral survey and passed a new law that formally abolished landowners' right to claim land. Instead, the state was now granted full and inalienable rights over this land, as if it were a juridical person. Even though Shishakli's efforts at land redistribution had proven abortive, almost overnight the Syrian state became the permanent legal owner of hundreds of thousands of hectares of unregistered land.

These initiatives were relatively small and – as in the case of land reform – were in some cases unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the measures enacted the principle of the state's right to regulate economic life and created important new domains of intervention. Furthermore, these crisis responses necessitated a series of additions to the institutional machinery of the state. Although small-scale and gradual, this incremental accumulation would nevertheless enact a radical transformation of the Syrian state.

Crisis outcome: incremental discontinuity

Crisis responses in 1950s Syria set in motion an incremental process of institutional change known as *layering* (Schickler 2001, Thelen 2002, Palier 2005: 127–44), a modality of cumulative change in which 'new elements attached to existing institutions gradually change their status and structure' (Streeck and Thelen 2005b: 31). In order to overcome the pervasive anarchy affecting the country, new offices charged with guiding the economy were bolted on to existing government institutions, while injections of personnel allowed for greater professionalisation of the civil service. This expansion created a second-order need for further institutions to oversee inter-agency activity. Little by little, statist solutions that were initially confined to coordinating unruly private sector activity in agriculture and industry were rolled out to new policy domains such as economic planning and infrastructure investment. Remarkably, this steady expansion of statism progressed unaffected by the rapid political polarisation that developed after the fall of Shishakli and the return to civilian government in 1954. This political instability reached its peak in 1958, when Syria ceased to exist as an independent state. In spite of this slide into a situation close to civil war, the coherence and capabilities of the Syrian state continued to increase. Whereas government policies after independence had initially been 'ad hoc, piecemeal responses to diverse problems', in the words of Sadowski (1984: 206), incremental additions over the following decade created a fully-fledged statist mode of economic regulation that was a world away from the fragile colonial state inherited from France.

The exponential growth of the Syrian state during these years cannot be dismissed as a natural consequence of self-government. Although bureaucratic expansion was common in many newly independent countries (Migdal 1988), the number of officials employed by the Syrian state to deal with agriculture and industry did not actually increase so dramatically. Disregarding teachers and the armed forces, the Syrian civil service increased from 3866 in 1946 to 4263 in 1949, then 4754 in 1954, and 5194 in 1956. This personnel growth was concentrated in the ministries of Finance, Agriculture, and Justice (Crow 1964: 122).

More significant than this quantitative increase was the qualitative transformation of the civil service that was intended to implement the new regulatory policies of the 1950s. The state bureaucracy was streamlined, wages increased, and professionalisation introduced, including the promulgation of no doubt unwelcomed new norms such as the requirement for state officials to keep regular working hours, to remain in the office during those hours, and to no longer receive family and friends in the workplace or conduct private business out of government offices.¹¹ In keeping with the military concern for social discipline, Shishakli also banned state employees from political activity, which would impede the orderly running of state institutions.

Despite this improved efficiency, the piecemeal, improvised nature of crisis response in the early 1950s did result in a certain amount of institutional duplication and redundancy. The newly created Cotton Office, for example, was part of the Ministry of Agriculture, but the older Cereals Office (that had grown from the agency established in the Second World War) belonged to the Ministry of National Economy. State projects of agricultural irrigation fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Works. Coordination between the steadily expanding agencies was so poor that even civil servants confused the names of government departments.¹² Some coherence was lent by the powers of oversight given to the Ministry of Finance, though the tariffs and price controls introduced after the 1951 harvest failure by the Ministry of National Economy also affected the money supply in ways that escaped the that ministry's control (Sadowski 1984: 227–9). To solve this problem, the creation of a Central Bank was proposed. As an interim measure, a Currency and Credit Council (CCC) was established in 1953 with responsibility for regulating the money supply and overseeing banking (Asfour 1959: 55–64). Members of the CCC included not just representatives of the relevant government ministries, but also the state-owned Agricultural Bank and the private sector. The perceived effectiveness of the CCC had secondary ripple effects: its public–private composition also served the model for other new bodies of policy coordination: notably the Permanent Economic Council, tasked with elaborating development policies, and the Economic Development Institute, which would provide the council with technical expertise (Challah 1965: 77–8).

Additional support for these new layers of institutions came from Syria's first World Bank report (IBRD 1955). The report recommended government investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and education on an unprecedented scale, but advised against state involvement in land reform or industrial development. These prescriptions may have reinforced the pre-existing commitment to statism, but Syrian officials roundly rejected the World Bank's proposal that land ownership and industry should be left entirely to market forces.

A further wave of institutional growth was stimulated by the adoption of Syria's first Seven-Year Plan (1955–1961) for economic development. During the first two years of the plan, the state budget increased by 165 per cent as investments expanded in public works. In 1956, the Syrian Central Bank was created, and in 1958 the Economic Development Institute was upgraded into a fully-fledged Ministry of Planning (Sadowski 1984: 235).

Although the pace of institutional change between 1951 and 1958 was swift, it was not without its obstacles. Despite efforts to train and recruit the specialist cadres needed to fill positions in the new technical agencies, there was a shortage of experienced personnel (Mahassen 1957). Some functions, such as the collection of statistics, remained dispersed and inefficiently duplicated across different government directorates (Sharif 1964). After its first two years, the Seven-Year Plan ground to a halt because of a lack of funds. Under the influence of the Cold War, the Suez Crisis, and the rising power of local leftist parties such as the Ba'th, Syria's political scene was riven by ideological polarisation (Seale 1986). For some, the idea of a political union with Nasser's Egypt promised the only way to avoid civil war: in February 1958, the two countries merged to form the United Arab Republic. Despite this political collapse, the institutions of the Syrian state remained strong. Indeed, the subsequent introduction of overtly socialist policies under Nasser (1958–1961) and then the Ba'th Party (1963–1970) built on the institutional architecture that had accumulated during the 1950s (Heydemann 1999). When examined from the perspective of these later socialist decrees, the cumulative transformation of Syrian state institutions in the 1950s might not seem especially dramatic. Yet

compared with the skeletal institutional apparatus inherited from the French, by 1958 the capabilities, reach, and regulatory powers of the Syrian state were almost unrecognisable. As Sadowski (1984: 235–6) summarises:

The government now had the power to regulate prices, shape industrial relations, and nationalize firms in the public interest. It was the largest single landowner and supervised the cultivation of the major crops. The Ministry of Public Works was larger than any private construction firm, the state banks dwarfed all competition, and all railroads, ports, and utilities were state property. Furthermore, public support for the extension of the state's economic activities remained strong. [...] the structural foundations for state capitalism in Syria were fairly complete.

Although incremental, policy changes in the 1950s thus effected a radical transformation in the nature of the Syrian state.

Conclusion

Besides reaffirming the imperative to take ideational explanations seriously, this article highlights the need for scholars to expand their attention to the full universe of cases of post-crisis institutional change. Not all crises lead to abrupt, discontinuous change: the aftermath of crisis may alternatively involve incremental discontinuity, adaptive reproduction, or even the dogged persistence of the status quo. By studying only those cases of radical paradigm shifts in economic governance, scholars are effectively selecting on the dependent variable. Other outcomes of crisis are empirically available.

Conducting a process tracing of the outcome of one these understudied categories of crisis – where radical change is incremental rather than abrupt – allows the identification of a new causal mechanism. The specific configuration of commensurability between crisis narrative and crisis response, I hypothesise, may explain these apparently unusual cases. As we have seen, crisis in post-independence Syria did not produce an abrupt ideational shift. Although political actors differed in their narratives, they nevertheless agreed on statist policies to resolve the crisis. This ambiguous agreement meant there was no need for Syrian actors to undergo a Damascene conversion: policies of statism responded to the crisis narratives of both guided economy *and* social discipline. It was this particular configuration of divergent crisis narratives and convergent crisis response that provided the mechanism for a radical transformation that was incremental rather than abrupt.

The logical implications of this argument can be developed to build a generalisable model that not only has the potential to explain incremental discontinuities in post-crisis governance, but also expands the scope of ideational explanations to encompass all four varieties of institutional change after crisis. My argument suggests the potential insights that can be obtained by reconnecting ideational accounts of economic change with the broader literature on historical institutionalism. In doing so, political scientists and sociologists will be able to develop more adequate theories to explain the outcomes of crisis.

Notes

1. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.
This position is commensurate with what might broadly be labelled constructivist institutionalism (Blyth 2002, Hay 2006, Widmaier *et al.* 2007, Samman 2015).
2. Markaz al-Wathā'iq al-Tārīkhīya [Syrian State Archive, Damascus], Harant al-Za'im, Commander of the Gendarmerie, 'al-Hāla al-Rūhīya wa'l-Indībāt wa'l-Tanzīm 1945 [The State of Morale, Discipline, and Order]'.
3. UK Foreign Office Confidential file 501/2, 'The Greater Syria Movement', January 10, 1948.
4. *Alif Bā'*, November 21, 1946.
5. Jalāl Farūq al-Sharīf, 'al-Jundīya bayna Ḥurriyat al-Fard wa-Salāmat al-Umma [Conscription: between Individual Freedom and the Safety of the Nation]' in *al-Jundī* 91, 1 (June 1951), 3.
6. Kāmil Iyād, 'al-Jaysh wa'l-Sha'b [The Army and the People]' in *al-Majalla al-'Askariya* 13 (August 1951), 12.
7. Bashīr Sādiq, 'al-'Askariya wa'l-Ḥayāt al-Ijtīmā'iya [The Military and Social Life]' in *al-Majalla al-'Askariya* 16 (November 1951), 16.
8. *Bulletin Economique de la Chambre de Commerce d'Alep 1953* (Aleppo: Imprimerie Rotos, 1953), 9–10.
9. See note 8.

10. *Bulletin Economique de la Chambre de Commerce d'Alep 1953*, 13.
11. *Alif Bā'*, December 14, 1951, 2.
12. *Al-Ayyām*, January 22, 1952.

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