Syria: "More Tribal, More Sectarian, More Crony Capitalist Than Ever"

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Bashar al-Assad has started confiscating the homes of Syrians who fled during the Civil War. For decades, his clan has purged the state of all but the most fanatical loyalists: now, it's doing the same to society itself.

In September 2011, Syrian leftist Yassin al-Haj Salah warned that the revolution was entering "a fateful situation, predisposed toward destruction." The first peaceful protests that spring were viciously repressed by Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, and over the summer the revolt developed into an armed uprising. Yet after eight years of this "fateful situation," today it is the Assad regime that has prevailed.

Despite the length of the war and the catastrophes it has brought, the deeper forces behind Syria's conflict remain poorly understood, even on the Left. The protagonists are too often seen in the culturalist terms of "Sunnis vs. Shias," or "Islamists vs. Secularists." Just as often, the war is reduced to pure geopolitics, with the lead actors assumed to be mere proxies for America and its international opponents (or allies).

Rarest of all is any developed discussion of the class dynamics that shaped the Syrian state and society even before the 2011 conflict. Yet these had a decisive effect on the uprising and the regime's ability to withstand it. Grasping these social elements of the conflict is just as important today if we want to understand the Assad regime's strategy for the "new Syria," and how it intersects with the plans of his Russian and Syrian allies.

Joseph Daher is the author of *Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of the State Resilience*(Pluto, 2019). He spoke to Joe Hayns about the deeper origins of the conflict, reasons for the Assad regime's survival, and its strategy for the "new Syria."

Joe Hayns: Gilbert Achcar uses the word "patrimonial" to describe those countries in the Arabic-speaking world in which clusters of families "own" both the state and capital: Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states. Meanwhile, he describes others like Egypt and Tunisia as "neo-patrimonial" — countries in which kin, capital ownership, and state control overlap, but not to such an extent. You put Syria in this first group — why is that?

Joseph Daher: Achcar's use of patrimonial and neo-patrimonial was very useful. By "patrimonial," I mean a state that was completely privatized, within a family and its own networks. This made overthrowing the state much more difficult than in the "neo-patrimonial" ones you mention, where the key sections of the state power were able to remove Ben Ali and Mubarak while maintaining the basic form of rule.

In Sudan and Algeria — which are each seeing huge uprisings today — there have been neo-patrimonialism processes, though the real power is held by the highest strata of the military. This

hasn't reached the level of Syria, where bureaucratic, military, and financial power is *completely* in the hands of one family and its wider network.

JH: Given this continuity, could you explain the shift you see, from "corporatist" to "neoliberal" state policies?

JD: There was an extension of neoliberal policies with Bashar al-Assad becoming president in 2000 and a weakening of corporatist organizations — the Ba'ath Party, peasants' networks, and the General Federation of Trade Unions. These networks were never meant to empower peasants or workers, instead being organs of control and clientelism. Yet they were used less after 2000.

It has been forgotten that when [Bashar's father] Hafez al-Assad came to power against the radical wing of the Ba'ath Party (in 1971), he had to choose: annihilate the existing institutions, or use them. The first people he repressed were Ba'athists, and other leftists outside the party. He retained the institutions as networks of control, while also seeking collaboration with sections of the bourgeoisie, especially in Damascus.

But in the mid to late 1970s, you began to see an "opening" — *infitah* — to capital, which widened in the 1980s with the fiscal crisis. With Bashar you had an acceleration along this path of foreign banks, foreign investment, etc. With this broad change came a weakening of the regime's ties to its historic social base — namely, the middle-class peasantry and workers, especially in the public sector — and a switch to a reliance on the urban upper middle class and sections of the bourgeoisie-proper.

Bashar wasn't like his father; he grew up in Damascus, among the richest strata of society, and was educated in Britain. And in the 2000s, there was a new generation of technocrats, enacting classic neoliberal policies, saying "this is the solution for Syria." But the general move from a state-capitalist to a patrimonial-neoliberal mode began as early as the later 1970s.

JH: If the regime's reliance on popular institutions diminished through the 2000s, were the popular classes able to generate autonomous institutions, through which to express themselves politically and make demands?

JD: Into the 2000s, there were more than 170 debate clubs around Syria, some of which looked more toward national democratic rights — those of Kurds, Assyrians, and so on — and sometimes other topics like the economy and the state. There were leftists, too. In Damascus, there were small clubs of people organizing on a left-wing basis — there was a group inspired by Attac (a campaign for a tax on financial transactions), for example. Most debating clubs were forcefully closed after only a year; people were attacked.

There were also students trying to organize independently from the main students' union, especially around the Palestinian *intifada* in 2003. They were repressed by the regime, for they were seen as a threat which might develop into something more radical.

Every time workers tried to organize or resist liberalization policies — and there were also strikes — they were either repressed or co-opted by the regime's own General Federation of Trade Unions. There was not — as in Egypt, for example — any attempt to organize independent trade unions. And, we could see this in the [2011] uprising: there were no mass groups organizing on an explicitly class basis.

The capacities of groups independent from state organs were very, very limited. At the end of the 1970s, trade unions and professional associations played an important role, but they were nearly

completely repressed and replaced by regime-built organizations.

JH: Did anything of these unions remain through later decades — if not institutionally, then as a strain of collective memory? Were there any personalities that weathered the 1980s and 1990s?

JD: Unfortunately, no institutions survived, and hardly any collective memory remained of the significant strikes and demonstrations that happened across Syria in the 1970s and early 1980s. This history was not well-known by the new generation of protesters in 2011 — it was only known by older generations, those who been involved in leftist movements and groups.

Many once-prominent leftists did act as independents in various Local Coordination Committees and other structures established during the uprising, rather than through formal political organizations. Many were also involved in the coalition of fourteen leftist and democratic organizations — *al-Watan*, or "The Nation" — which brought together veteran oppositionists with the younger generations. But by 2012, this coalition disappeared, faced with the severe repression of the majority of its members.

JH: In northern Syria, through the 2000s, Kurdish groups organized along both national and social lines. Why such a pronounced difference with the rest of the country?

JD: There is, of course, a long history of Kurdish political organizing and resistance in Syria. The first Kurdish political party in Syria was established in the mid-1950s — before, most were in the Syrian Communist Party but since it was "nationalistic" it didn't defend their rights, and so many left.

On the eve of the uprising, there were over ten Kurdish parties, some very much personality centered, and some organized on a mass level, for example, Yakiti, a very important party established in the 1990s by Kurds with a left-nationalist background.

In 2004 protests spread through Kurdish areas around Syria. They were organizing on the basis of opposition to the discrimination they faced but, also, yes, around socioeconomic issues. Historically, the areas with the largest Kurdish populations are also the poorest, despite being important for agriculture and oil.

But the greater use of socioeconomic discourse did not necessarily imply organizing on a class basis. Even if you look at the PYD (Democratic Union Party) — the sibling of the Kurdish Workers' Party, PKK — in the late 2000s, it started abandoning the PKK's earlier class-based discourse.

There was, though, a kind of collective common sense concerning socioeconomics. You had these kinds of things being raised at the beginning of the uprising. One example: in Da'ra, they targeted Syriatel's offices — owned by [Bashar al-Assad's cousin] Rami Makhluf — as if to say "this is the guy who's robbing *us*." This common sense was present, but not primary.

JH: If the popular classes lacked institutions of their own, there were still collective ways of thinking, including along ethnolinguistic and sectarian lines, which became more pronounced during the war. Authors like Rima Majed and Yassin al-Haj Saleh, to name just two, have theorized sectarianization as a strategy deployed by the state. But was it only a *state* strategy?

JD: Hafez maintained some redistribution through his reign, but this diminished through the 2000s, leading to increased poverty levels. At the same time, there was a *strengthening* of "primordial" identities and relations, as encouraged by the regime — tribal relations, grouping around religious figures, and so on, partly also because the withdrawal of services left space for religious charities.

Sectarianism was built up at the beginning of the uprising, in the more mixed regions. Regime crimes — especially in the Hama countryside and the Homs region — nurtured the process. It also spread thanks to the way the regime represented any protester — even if they weren't Muslims — as Salafi, as "extremists," as a way to scare people and increase sectarianism. Nor should we forget how the regime released Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist prisoners at the beginning of the uprising, precisely in order to give the uprising a more sectarian definition.

Definitely the main force producing sectarianization in Syrian society was the state; that does not mean it was the only one. We need only look at the onset of the military conflict between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Brotherhood used sectarianism to portray itself as the representative of the Sunni community in Syria. This never worked, because the Sunni community is not one single political identity — in fact, it bears great social and political varieties.

JH: If one reason for the regime's resilience is its use of "sectarianization" — fomenting political divisions among the opposition — another is its own ability to look past religions, languages, and so on. We could mention, by way of example, its relationships with Sunni capitalists — maybe "capitalists who are Sunni" — through the 2000s.

JD: That's right. It is wrong to say it's an Alawite regime, but it does have a preponderance of Alawite personalities, especially in the security services, whose higher echelons are often directly linked to al-Assad's family.

But if it was *only* Alawite, it would have been gone a long time ago — this is why it's important to say it's a patrimonial state that has to use various tools of repression and various types of networks, both through and *above* sectarian differences.

JH: Still, there was much cross-sect, even anti-sect organizing through 2011 and 2012. Looking just at the PYD and the Kurdish situation, while multiple tendencies in the English-speaking left see the PYD as *the* party of progressive, even revolutionary, change, others criticize its relationship with the regime and the United States. Its links with Arabic-speaking tribes and other Arab groups tend to undermine the most cartoonish representations of the party. But no one would deny that it has been nimble, tactically, faced with a long-term, mortal danger from US-backed Turkey, and, from late 2013, an existential threat from Da'esh.

JD: In this kind of war, it's difficult to have a sustained strategy, but it's clear that the PYD's aim has been to strengthen its influence and control the areas it could, through even short-term relationships with the actors around them.

We should remember that the PYD was not the main actor within the "Kurdish street" at the start of the uprising — indeed, no Kurdish party was. It was mostly youth networks. Within this movement was the Yekiti Party — already weakened by divisions — and the Kurdish Future Movement, a smaller party that still had influence. After 2011, there were Local Coordination Committees, organizing throughout Kurdish areas, in collaboration, mainly in cities, with other ethnicities, whether Arab, Assyrian, or Syriac.

The PYD really became the main Kurdish political party in mid-2012, when the regime withdrew from various areas in order to concentrate on others. The PYD was allowed to build its own political and military capacities. But the accusation that the PYD is a "tool" of the regime is completely wrong. Both actors collaborated at certain times, but this didn't turn into a longer-term relationship. The PYD wanted to follow a line independent of both regime and opposition.

That shouldn't prevent us from criticizing the PYD. As I say, although there have been understandings between the two, the PYD is not allied to the regime. One sign of that is the regime's continuous refusal to acknowledge any kind of Kurdish rights. When the regime captured Aleppo in 2016, it gradually took back the areas under PYD control, because it could not deal with this other powerful force.

Bashar al-Assad and other officials have accused the PYD of being a "US stooge" and "tool" and have said they will "crush it," considering [former Da'esh capital, now PYD-held] Raqqa to be occupied territory. In Afrin, for instance, the Russians pushed the PYD to make a deal with the regime, saying "if you remove all your heavy weapons and give in to the regime, Turkey will not come in and invade this area." The PYD refused, and the result was the Turkish occupation of Afrin last year.

Even if there are now negotiations, the regime has refused any kind of conditions put by the PYD for federalism or decentralization. It's wrong to say that they're allies, even if at some points there have been understandings between them.

JH: Looking back, do you think the lack of popular-class, Arab-Kurdish collaboration after 2012 was inevitable, given the historic weakness of popular-class organizing as such and, indeed, the fact that Turkey played such an important role in the "opposition in exile"?

JD: I think we should make the distinction between socialism from below and popular-class organizations. Obviously, the long-term absence of the latter was a weakness in the Syrian uprising.

But there was collective organization from below — the Local Coordination Committees, and subsequently, the Local Councils were able to challenge state domination. In summer 2012, they were at the doors of Damascus, with large areas of the country outside of regime control. In terms of the Syrian revolution, they were radical. It meant the state had disappeared from a certain area, so you had a kind of attempt at dual power.

The vast majority promoted a democratic, nonsectarian discourse. Some also conveyed a socioeconomic appeal. Because of the socio-geographic makeup of the uprising, socioeconomic issues were raised, as was corruption, even if it was not at the center of things.

When it comes to the Kurdish issue, unfortunately, there is a long tradition among various sections of the Syrian opposition — and even some leftists — refusing Kurdish self-determination. Ten to 15 percent of the population is Kurdish, mostly in the northeast. But even there, they are a narrow majority, and over half the Kurds were in Aleppo and in Damascus. So they were not interested in separating off as an independent state, but rather a federal system, decentralization, more recognition of Kurdish national rights, the removal of "Arab" in the "Syrian Arab Republic," etc. — something, incidentally, that was refused by the wider opposition, at the first conference in the summer of 2011, and which showed the limitations of the traditional political opposition.

From the beginning of 2012, Kurdish coordination committees increasingly raised their own demands, but from the outset they were completely rejected by the official opposition. Anyone raising Kurdish national demands was accused of separatism.

But to say it was definitely going to happen this way . . . I think there were possibilities, especially from the collective organizations from below, and there were experiences of co-organization in Aleppo, in mixed cities, and also in Qamishli, where you had Assyrian, Kurdish, and Arab coordination committees working together, raising their common demands in each of the languages.

It was really the opposition in exile, with its historical Arab-nationalist approach, that refused

Kurdish national rights. This refusal was supported by foreign actors, especially Turkey, which saw the PYD presence at its borders as the biggest threat, which is why it opened the doors to Islamic fundamentalist organizations to attack the Kurds.

JH: You write about the "reconstruction" of the country and the state's huge need for foreign investment. I was surprised to read that neither Russia nor Iran, the states that have supported the regime the most, appear willing or able to provide such investment, returning us to a question that's hung over the counterrevolution: what has led those countries to support it so staunchly?

JD: We must be clear, without Russian and Iranian assistance — including Hezbollah and other sectarian militias — the regime would not have been able to sustain itself politically, militarily, and economically.

These forces' interventions were key. And even though Russia's official mass intervention started in 2015, it had troops on the ground already that were aiding the regime's security services. Iranian-backed forces — Hezbollah and others — played a role from 2012. That was the key element.

Why did they intervene? The first reason is obviously to preserve their geopolitical interests. We understand imperialism as both economic interests and geopolitics, and the relationship between them.

It is also important to remember that this came *after* what happened in Libya. Russia felt betrayed by the US administration, which said it would only intervene in Benghazi if Gaddafi's troops attacked the city. But it instead mounted a full-blown intervention against the regime, which had economic ties with Russia.

Iranian and Russian possibilities in Syria were also related to the weakening of US imperialism in the region, especially following its defeat in Iraq, the international financial crisis in 2008, and the uprisings themselves. Barack Obama did not want a new Iraq War in Syria, but rather an understanding between the ruling parties and conservative oppositions — usually Brotherhood or Brotherhood-allied groups — that would serve US interests.

Russia wanted to preserve its interests with the country in the Middle East region with which it has the strongest relationship. As Putin said even before 2011, Russia wanted to expand the two naval bases there. It's different in the Iranian case. First, it needs to preserve a route for the delivery of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. More generally, its strategy is to seek a better position to negotiate with stronger actors by acting as a "nuisance" — through its ability to cause trouble elsewhere. Iran attempts to counter any threat from the United States or other regional actors by saying, "if you strike us, we are able to counter-attack," whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, maybe in Yemen, even possibly now through Hamas, with its new leadership.

With Russia, it was a matter of keeping its main ally; for Iran, it was leverage and preventing what it saw as the unacceptable prospect of Syria into the hands of regional enemies such as Saudi Arabia.

JH: Why the lack of investment from either country — something that would presumably offer great opportunity for profit and political power? Why the help with the regime's resilience, but not its reconstruction?

JD: You just have to see their own economies. Both countries are facing sanctions and domestic socioeconomic protests. In Russia, Putin provoked massive demonstrations when he tried to raise the pension age, and in Iran, you can see, on a nearly continuous basis, strikes from various sectors

of the society. Especially with the sanctions, neither country has the capacity to really lead Syrian reconstruction — Russian's economy, remember, is only as big as Spain's.

You can see this in official Russian discourse, telling the world, "if you want to see the refugees back in Syria, you have to pay for reconstruction." This is starting to appeal to some states, particularly the more right-wing, even fascistic governments in Europe — and it also might appeal to some sections of the liberal-authoritarian governments, even though they are not convinced yet and are still refusing to participate in any kind of reconstruction unless there is a process for a political transition.

JH: Some challenge the notion of Russian and Iranian "imperialism" in Syria by invoking Lenin's definition of imperialism, claiming it instead focuses on the export of capital . . .

JD: Russia's intervention began for geopolitical rather than directly economic reasons — it had economic interests, but they were not so large. The same goes for Iran.

In fact, the biggest actors investing in Syria before the war were Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. If you were to follow a literalist reading of Lenin, these countries would have been the first to defend the Syrian state. In the first six months, these countries did, indeed, attempt to seek an understanding between the regime and some sectors of the conservative opposition, trying to calm the repression, and only [when that failed] did they turn support toward certain sectors of the opposition — the most reactionary ones.

Now Russia is attempting some kind of restitution because the war was costly in financial terms, most notably by seeking control of natural resources. But, as I said, it is finding reconstruction difficult.

JH: The counterrevolution has destroyed infrastructure and industries. Some capitals have been ruined; others have made fortunes. Most obviously those who sell the weapons of war, but also those investing in reconstruction sectors — real estate, transport, the production of secondary commodities, steel, concrete, and so on. If the state has to manage the relationship — the competition — between capitals in this "new Syria," is the Assad regime capable of doing so?

JD: The capitalist class has shrunk, massively. Especially those more independent from the state have left.

Today, the large capitalists who remain are very much linked to the security services, to the regime — otherwise, they couldn't have grown. Very often, we're talking now about merchants, traders, and frontmen: people who could purchase oil, large amounts of wheat, and so on, for the state.

In other words, the regime is, in all aspects, more patrimonial — its social base has shrunk. It is more sectarian, more tribal, more clientelist, more crony capitalist than before.

A process that began before the uprising was the growing importance of rents, of trade, and services — the productive economy has been hit very badly, and the share of salaries as a proportion of national income has decreased from 33 percent before the war to 20 percent now. Both will make managing the capitalist class easier.

JH: In the book, you detail Law No. 10, which tightens the demands on Syrians to prove that they own their properties. Millions of Syrians are outside the country and millions more are internally displaced. As you write, informal housing was very common in pre-2011 Syria, and, for obvious reasons, refugees may not possess property deeds. What effect do

you think this will have?

JD: The threat of people being dispossessed of their houses is real, and it's not the only one used to dispossess people — it's an expansion on Decree No. 66, enacted in 2012. These laws have two objectives.

First, they present economic opportunities, since much land is becoming available. Thirty to 50 percent of housing in Syria is informal. People left without proof that they were owners of particular areas or properties — how to prove it? And even if you can prove it, you have to fear security measures, you may have to pay a certain amount of money, and so on. Second, they also have political motivations; they aim to exclude socially dangerous classes and socially rebellious groups.

This has partly happened already at Basateen al-Razi in Damascus, where there was very low compensation — and this was for people who did have the right papers, who remained in Syria.

This threat exists, and if implemented on a national scale, could be very, very dangerous. Indeed, the people returning face multiple threats — the threat of young men being conscripted, or imprisoned. Even where so-called reconciliation agreements are in place, people are being killed, as happened in Da'ra, where military officers and personalities belonging to the opposition are being targeted by the security services and others.

If your area has been destroyed, what can you "come back to"? Indeed, there are 5 to 6 million IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in the region who can't go back, for this reason. If you look at eastern Aleppo, it's still very much destroyed, and state services are very bad; the same in Eastern Ghuta, outside Damascus, where there has been no large-scale reconstruction. In Homs, it's also going very slowly.

And, again, to do what? There is still an economic crisis, and there is no plan for a productive economy. State employment is restricted to the families of soldiers and the security services, and so for many, finding work is very hard. There's very high inflation, too — Syrians' real purchasing power has fallen massively since 2011.

Despite what the regime says, they don't want the vast majority of the refugees to come back. There are various reasons why it's hard to speak of return today, even if threats in other countries — the surrounding counties but also Europe — are "pushing" refugees to go back.

JH: I believe that after the first protests in Sudan in December, the very first foreign leader whom Omar al-Bashir visited was Assad. Should those that supported al-Bashar stay quiet about al-Bashir's regime and about popular organizing in the Middle East generally?

JD: I think among small sections of the left, internationalism is still important. Not only in a rhetorical sense, but as a means to learn from certain experiences abroad.

Even if Karl Marx's ideas are, somehow, coming back, radical left organizations in Europe and the United States — indeed, across the world — are in crisis. At the same time, you have sections of the Left focusing only on Western imperialism, without trying to learn from popular struggles from the Middle East. They point to their limitations alone, without noticing that these uprisings have shaken the world.

Yet the square-occupations movement came out of Tahrir Square. And look at the refugee issue and how it is influencing European states — including through the rise of authoritarian and even fascistic parties.

Much more can be done to criticize the relationship between Western ruling classes and the despotic regimes in the region. The latest example was the European Union's funding of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces in order to serve its racist anti-immigration policies. Today these same forces are being used to repress protestors in Sudan.

For Syria, much more could have been done in terms of international solidarity, and the reasons it wasn't owed a generalized crisis of the Left. If it used to raise its internationalist flag very high, you now have sections that are much more nationalistic, taking sides with this or that camp. That's a direct result of the weakening of class consciousness. And yet all our destinies are linked.

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