

Syria and the World: Reactionarism is Back, and Progressing - On the antiquated that penetrates our present

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There is something deeply atavistic about the course that the Syrian conflict has taken. Its latest developments, in particular, take us back to a time prior to the formation of the contemporary Syrian entity at the end of the First World War – indeed back to the nineteenth century or earlier. And behind this atavistic drama, some episodes of which are reviewed in this article, there appears to be an antiquating dynamic, so to speak, accompanied by justifications for the repeated resurrections of the what I shall call here “the antiquated.

The manifestations, dynamisms and justifications of this antiquating process are facets of an increasing reactionarism, the scope of which is now expanding far beyond Syria into the rest of the world.

Origins of the Antiquated

The latest development of this antiquation is the occupation of areas of Syria –in Latakia, Hama and others – by Russian forces, who are overseeing the regime’s military operations, and conducting their own aerial bombing campaigns. There is something reminiscent of traditional colonial campaigns in this: a colonial power deploys its superior armed forces in a weak country in order to protect its ‘legitimate interests’ there. The development comes half a century after the end of Western colonialism, and about seventy years after Syria’s independence. The air of something antiquated is enhanced by the Russian Orthodox Church giving its blessing to the Russian government’s war in Syria as a ‘holy war’. The ‘first socialist nation’, holy in its own way, is hearkening to the ‘holy Russia’ it was before the Bolshevik and Communist interval. An ‘eternal message’ is indispensable in any case. We have learnt from our own experience, and that of others, that holiness and uniqueness and eternal messages are associated with brutality, and demand an exemption from rules that supposedly apply to all actors in any given arena.

Both before and since holy Russia’s arrival, we have witnessed a stunning model of the antiquated and the holy in the form of Daesh (the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS). Daesh is an extraordinary mixture of various elements: an archaic human appearance, as contrived as it is ugly; an archaic discourse– also contrived, and utterly soulless; archaic symbols that are unfamiliar to most Muslims; and violent practices, extreme and boundless in their brutality and sensuality.

Even the most imaginative among us could never have imagined Daesh until it appeared: Is what we are witnessing real? Really real? Even those who knew something about the 'Islamic State in Iraq', which was likewise something unimaginable when it first appeared, thought that it was a specific, mysterious entity, emerging in special, strange circumstances, and likely to disappear soon. Things do not look like that today. Even if the page of Daesh were to be turned now, this brutish throwback has scarred our consciousness, society and politics and will ensnare and interrogate us for a long time to come. Daesh has forced all our contemporary states towards relativity and the probability of demise, not only as political institutions and populations, but also in a geographical sense. It has pushed us all into a vertiginous loop of questions about what we are, what we know, what we are experiencing, what we mean and what we want. It has forced Islam, the religion of Muslims, to face an unavoidable question: is this really a religion that calls for justice and charity, or is it a catalogue of killing and rule by terror? And is there any logic at all to the belief that 'divine governance' and 'implementing the Sharia' could lead to anything other than Daesh?

Daesh is however not the only antiquated phenomenon on the 'Islamic' front, even though it may offer the most perfect spectacle and the most complete contrivance of the antiquated. All armed Islamist forces fighting in Syria today are antiquated, contrived, soulless and thoughtless, and unjust. All of this raises questions about how prepared we are for the antiquated that penetrates our present. And should we not ask whether Islam itself is the source of the antiquated in our contemporary life?

Yet, even before Daesh, did we not witness another throwback that was also unimaginable until we saw its signs approaching day after day, month after month, year after year? By that I mean the establishment of a modern ruling dynasty, formed at the beginning of this century after its founder had killed tens of thousands of his subjects; two decades later he bequeathed the 'republic' to his lipping son, who has an acute inferiority complex. The implicit constitution of this regime is the continuation of the dynasty 'forever'. Almost all other developments in Syria over the past five years, and during the fifteen years since the establishment of the kingdom, are inscribed into this implicit constitution. And among the manifestations of this constitution are slogans that, despite their recent origin, sound ancient, archaic: 'Assad or we burn the country!' 'Assad or no one!' 'Assad or to hell with the country!' There are also fabricated holy ayahs, the product of seemingly new revelation, written on walls in Damascus: 'The intelligence services are the light of the heavens!' (In the Koran, there is an *ayah* that reads: Allah is the light of Heavens and Earth).

Like other dynasties in our times and in olden times, our young dynasty has placed itself under the protection of foreign powers in order to survive. Along with the dynasty and its state, we find ourselves bound to a world of religions and sects; calls for war, or jihad, invoking the names of Allah, Muhammad, Hussein or Zaynab, mixing the holy with murder. We are also bound to the world of 'protecting minorities' and the 'Oriental question', to obscene religious and sectarian discrimination, and to the world of colonialism and colonial campaigns.

Could then this, the Assad dynasty and its state and loyalties, be the source of the antiquated?

The movement of Syrian refugees - by sea or by foot, with many falling along the way - across the borders of hostile countries that define themselves by their past, into other countries that define themselves by a more recent past, also evokes something old. Its prototype is probably the movement of humans across continents in prehistoric times. It is something we feel we can easily understand, despite being 'corrupted' by the nation-state, which has become a binding framework for all thought and politics. All this is happening while the nation-state stands watching, either powerless, or attempting to contain this movement that is destabilising its meaning even before it destabilises its borders. Or it acts with racist dissipation, offering justifications inspired by 'civilisation', 'culture' and 'Christianity'.

Syria was a nation-state that negated itself in an altruistic, ideological negation (the pan-Arab nation being bigger than the state), before it ended up negating itself in a political, degenerate negation (the dynasty is bigger than the state and the nation). Nevertheless, the nation-state is one of the corner stones of the contemporary world system, with Germany and Sweden being the favourite destinations of Syrian refugees. There is also 'holy Russia'; Saudi Arabia, holy in its own way; Iran, also holy in its own way; and the US and Israel, the holy promised lands, each in its own way.

Before the return of holy Russia, the Daesh caliphate and the Assad kingdom, we had in the Middle East what may be the strangest and most modern archaic in the world: Israel. A state founded on religion and armed with nuclear weapons. On the one hand, it does not hide its discrimination when it refuses to accept Palestinians and Arabs as equal to its Jewish citizens; on the other, it enjoys explicit international protection. On the one hand, its (military) superiority to all Arabs is guaranteed; on the other, it does not stop crying out that it is surrounded by enemies and threatened. Arab nationalism, although it may rightfully be criticised as a secularized version of Islam, was established on a non-religious basis. But right beside us we have a state that does not stop declaring itself to be the state of the Jewish people, and the whole 'world' sees it as a completely legitimate state, and even a gauge of the legitimacy of the world itself.

Could this Israeli entity - which should have been a scandal from the perspective of the values of justice, freedom and the rule of law, upon which international law is supposedly based - be the source of the archaic in our region?

But before Israel, didn't we also have the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a state also based on religion? In fact, a state, which identifies itself with Islam and controls its most ancient holy sites. The only state in the world - before it was recently joined by Daesh - that cancels out women's faces and bans them from driving cars. Isn't this Wahhabi-Islamic state, owned by a ruling dynasty that enslaves the poor and women, decapitates wrongdoers with swords, and guards oil fields, the source of the archaic? The religious archaic, the social archaic and the political archaic? Reactionarism in its perfection?

Besides Saudi Arabia, there is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is not owned by a ruling dynasty but is based on religion too, obscene in its sectarianism, and a force of sectarian explosion in the afflicted Middle East.

Thanks to these three kingdoms - Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran - the policies of the powerful international powers have prioritised stability: thus effectively sponsoring the states' transformation into security agencies, and permitting them to eradicate their subjects if they get out of hand, and not interfering with the internal matters of the dynasties and juntas which rule over their citizens' lives. This prioritisation of stability has benefited despotic regimes, including the Assad regime, and has never been in the interest of the populace and their demands and political activities.

Isn't this, rather, the most important source of the antiquated, which controls all other sources?

The world's sickness

Overall, the fast-moving current of antiquation that is engulfing us all appears to be a result of three springs merging into one: the spring of religion, which offers legitimacy to existing and soon-to-exist despotic authorities; the spring of despotic states that receive assistance and legitimacy from a world system centered around stability; and the spring of this world-system itself, which acts as a pillar for different forms of discrimination, privilege and prejudice. The antiquated is a mixture of discrimination and prejudice protected by force, which in turn protects privilege. It is the face of rising reactionarism in today's world.

I am referring to the interlacing of three factors. The US and the West more generally, including Israel, dominate the world system; it is Syria's bad fortune that Russia too is a partner in this domination. I am inclined to consider the world system as the dynamic source of antiquation in our lives; the source of reactionary tendencies, including religious brutality and states' despotism. That is because the strongest archaic is the archaic of the strongest. The democratic West is the patron of Israel and Saudi Arabia. It is largely thanks to the democratic West that al-Qaeda was established (which emerged from jihadi movement in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in 1980s), and the West is the structural supporter of state despotism, even when it may make the political choice to not support some such states.

The ascription of this primacy to the world system as a source of reactionarism does not stem from nationalism. Those who are so motivated often contend with blaming the West for everything, rightly or wrongly. This often results in them being content with a local despotism that pretends to be anti-Western (Saudi Arabia itself does this, not only 'culturally' but also politically) and invokes native culture, particularly religion, to ostensibly confront the West. In other words, this means confronting injustice in the world system with the despotism of ruling dynasties and juntas, or that of religion and religious juntas, which are no less hungry for power and money. This is self-destructive.

The world system is not just the West, and it does not only rely on the West, even if the West is central to it. We, too, are within this system, and we have greatly contributed to the aggravation of reactionarism in the world through violent Islamism that negates the rest of the world in a futile, negative manner; and through the despotism of states hostile to their publics and to democracy. Our nationalists - who prop themselves up on the likes of the Assad regime and Iran, the likes of Hezbollah and Hamas, on doctrines ranging from the ideas of Munir Shafiq to Mohammad Abed al-Jabiri, among many others - also reproduce this world system in politics and culture, and do not provide any exits or alternatives. Russia and China are also part of this system, both having stood firm in the face of democracy. At the heart of it is beloved Israel, which is permitted to act like a spoilt feudal child among bourgeois fathers. And at the top of it all are the Western powers that vigorously refuse, as does Israel, to be treated as equals among other powers.

The reason for discussing the primacy of the world system as a source of reactionarism and the archaic in the world stems from two factors: theoretical and practical. The theoretical factor is that the world is the only unit of analysis today. There is no such thing as the local anymore, and we cannot understand much without thinking globally, as alternative globalization movements have been calling on us to do. This is even more relevant in the so-called Middle East, the most internationalised region in the world, where societies' fates are determined not solely by their internal structures and dynamics. More than anywhere else in the region this is the case in 'Assad's Syria', the 'external state' (that shuts down the internal political field and plays/fiddles(?) with that of other weaker countries, preferably using sub-state actors from the latter: this is called, 'stability') that enjoys a broad international base making up for the narrowness of its domestic social base. As for the practical factor, it is a need to include our changes in a process of global change, which is both desirable and increasingly urgent. We ought to work locally and globally at the same time, with the need for a new global framework for transformative and liberatory work becoming ever more necessary, following the failure of internationalisms and the calcification of their latest incarnations.

As Syrians, and the Palestinians along with us, we are qualified to talk about this, to the extent that the destruction of our country and the elimination of Palestine are globally premised and are largely not the result of actions by Syrians or Palestinians, whether successful or stupid. The world is sick, and its sickness is aggravating our sicknesses, both inherited and acquired.

There is today an international question in the form of the Syrian question, which is not only a question for the Syrians (with whom the world has been plagued). It is a question for the world that

has engineered – through widely known events that have not yet been forgotten – the Syrian tragedy and shaped it according to its own image and ideal.

The question of changing the world is a question posing itself again today, and one that is likely to do so even more forcefully in the years to come.

The culture of reactionarism

The process of dynasty transition in Syria and the enslavement of the dynasty's subjects was supported by all international powers. Not a word of objection or suspicion was heard from the democratic countries in the world, nor from the international Left. Bashar al-Assad was baptised as heir to his father by the Americans and the French, as is well-known, and by Arab states that either were already hereditary kingdoms or found in the Assad precedence something their ageing presidents would later imitate. The upheaval in Syria's history, and what appears to be a high-speed reversal towards the past, a return to historical eras that were supposed to have ended, is not unlinked to this international patronage.

That is to say, once again, that the archaic in our life is not exclusively local, or referring only to the fragility of the local new. It is the product of the global new, or what this new contains of the archaic, particularly the phenomena of clientelism, discrimination and evasion of justice. The Assads' state has benefited from these phenomena as much as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran have. Anyone who owns a state wins, however criminal their state may be, as long as this criminality is directed only at the weak and not at the powerful.

The contemporary state system is indeed the pump that drives the flow of the antiquated. I mean that all the inequality and injustice found in this world, all the violence and privilege, all the discrimination, plotting and conspiring that are characteristic of the regime are the source of what is archaic, dark and reactionary in today's world.

I refer to plotting, conspiracy and discrimination as a way of saying that the most prominent characteristic of the world system today, for the past quarter of a century, is deliberate and well thought-out discrimination. It is not the result of supposed 'structural differences'. Before the last quarter of a century, we were accustomed to a legal notion of justice, and to structuralist explanations of injustice. These explanations posited injustice as resulting from abstract, impersonal mechanisms linked to the capitalist market and unequal exchange, or to an unequal distribution of power determined by structural factors or by environmental or population changes. Not only is this an insufficient explanation today, it is in fact becoming increasingly misleading. The most stark examples of injustice in today's world are linked to deliberate discrimination, to clientelism, to sectarianism or 'civilisationism', that is, to conscious, conspiratorial political calculations. For instance, why are Palestinians lagging behind Israelis? Because of some capitalist logic or what is known as 'modernity'? The problem is in fact more closely linked to colonialism, understood as a set of deliberate processes aimed at destroying the life of the subjugated colony. Why are vast sections of Syrians lagging behind the Assadist junta, which has been plundering the country for decades and has not stopped short of beheading independents from the society of what I call the 'black Syrians' and spoiling their lives? As if we were in an international competitive market of states and societies, in which those who have made the most effort to 'develop' themselves win.

Perhaps this point deserves more attention in political science, and the humanities more generally, which are today more concerned with political agency and the political agent who can choose and escape inevitabilities, and whose behaviour cannot be merely explained by structural constraints. The political agent is conscious; she or he thinks, contemplates and chooses, plots and conspires.

Consciousness is not only a principle for distinguishing between good and evil – whether these are specific or general, abstract or concrete – but is also a principle of malice, cunning, savviness and bad faith, without which we cannot think about politics in our contemporary world. One glance around us, at our social environments, is enough to see the prevalence of malice, deceit and bad faith, whether linked to an individual's private arrangements and policies or to collective identities and politics. They are deeply embedded in local and international structures, where the considerations of national and social solidarity have less weight than the considerations of the sect or the group.

Today the world stands defeated in front of its own malice, deceit and ill intentions. If one were to describe the characteristics of the archaic, they would certainly include degeneration, selfishness and malice: the brutality of holy Russia and its lies; the degeneration and ill intentions of Islamists; the selfishness and hatred of the Assadists; the malice and racism of the Israelis; the arrogance and wickedness of the Americans; the vileness and corruption of the Saudis; the hostility and hatred of the Iranians; and the sectarianism of all.

This is the world of reactionarism – a world of malice, meanness, hatred, discrimination, violence and corruption. And these are not disconnected, in my view, from the rise of culturalism or civilisationism in the world since the end of the Cold War, especially when these are used to justify the privileges of some with their special virtues, and the deprivations of others with their own faults and deficiencies. Culturalism elevates certain 'civilisations', religions and sects, and the relationships and people linked to them, and sets those as the standard for thinking and good judgement.

This intellectual climate is a founding aspect of the current world system and a basis for justifying discrimination within it.

(Inter)Nationalising the world

Until recently, right up to the 1980s, it was believed that a correspondence between the contemporary and the just was both guaranteed and self-evident. The concept of progress supposedly ensured that the two were fused, and added a third, social dimension: the interests of the majority of the population in any given country, and the majority of people in the world. Progress was justice that yielded good for a growing majority of people, according to formulas we are still trying to improve (rather than readymade formulas from the past).

But progress collapsed a generation or two ago. Today the contemporary still exists, but it is not only unjust, it is also discriminatory and based on privilege. There is no longer a universal notion of justice, at a time when no country can isolate itself from the world and non-universal justice is no longer possible. At the same time, the past does not offer us justice. Justice in the world is a project of today, and of the future.

There is a crisis of the Left in the world, and the Syrian revolution has given it the opportunity to become manifest in the ugliest of ways. I believe this crisis can be traced back in part to the reality that the Left no longer occupies the position of critically examining the world system, and the question of revolution and changing the world no longer occupies its mind. The Left today is largely made up of domesticated middle-class forces, pastist in their thought and policies. It has not managed to get out of the Cold War mindset, and it finds itself completely incapable of understanding the social explosions in our internationalised region and other parts of the world.

To conclude, the archaic and the unjust walk hand in hand today, and with them, the meaning of the

world has crumbled. There is today no progress that is not universal and global, and there is no world that does not share progress. There is no world that shares progress without being contemporary, residing in the present and heading towards the future.

Sharing progress means people reclaiming or reappropriating the world, (inter)nationalising it and sharing its ownership with other partners. It means building the meaning of the world, which is to say culture, around this partnership. The biggest obstacles facing this partnership are the privileges of the rich and the powerful, in addition to the political obstacles that stand in the way of universalising the progress achieved during a crisis for one reason or another.

When progress is not universal, reactionarism progresses.

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P.S.

* Friday Feb 2016:

<http://www.yassinhs.com/2016/02/19/syria-and-the-world-reactionarism-is-back-and-progressing/>

* *Aljumhuriya*, 19 February 2016 - Translated by: Shiyar Youssef and Alice Guthrie.