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To cite this article: Martínez, José Ciro, "Rebellion, Sectarian Slaughter or Civil War? Reading the Syrian Mêlée," *New Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2013)

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archive/1123>

Online Publication Date: 12 July 2013

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Rebellion, Sectarian Slaughter or Civil War? Reading the Syrian Mêlée

The Syrian Rebellion

Fouad Ajami

Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 2012, 260 pp., £14.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0817915049

A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution

Samar Yazbek, translated by Max Weiss

London, Haus Publishing, 2012, xii+ 264 pp., £18.95, Paperback

ISBN: 978-2908323125

Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising

Stephen Starr

London, C Hurst & Co., 2012, 232 pp., £14.99, Paperback

ISBN: 978-1849041973

Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience

Bassam Haddad

Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012, 280 pp., £38.50, Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0804773324

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Categorizing the events the world has witnessed in Syria since March 2011 is almost as difficult as analyzing their intensification over the last twenty-seven months. What began as a peaceful reform movement in response to a host of short, medium and long-term dynamics slowly became a full-blown armed conflict over the future of the country. Whether the protests followed by violent confrontations come to be known as a glorious revolution, a terrorist insurgency or an unending civil war depends as much on who emerges victorious from the present impasse as it does on how one reads the current conflict. It is this task, one that so crucially influences the diplomatic standing and international support of both the Syrian opposition and the Asad-led government, that commentators have sought to shape. And it is in this crucial task where much of what is being written and read is sadly misleading or incomplete, a product of long-standing misconceptions regarding the Middle East coupled with more recent distortions concerning the potency of religious identities and divisions in the region.

The most pressing problem plaguing many analyses of the Syrian mêlée is the uncritical and recurring use of the narrative of sectarianism. When employed, the myriad

reasons for support and opposition to the Asad-led regime are neglected, and the conflict becomes merely the re-enactment of a long-standing spiritual divide, where combatants are all entranced by religious divisions and seek only the imposition of sectarian domination. This is of course not to say that Syria has never had sectarian conflict, or that pre-conflict days were a utopia of peaceful relations between the country's numerous groups. Religious sects have coexisted peacefully in Syria for hundreds of years, but there were also tragic exceptions. Nevertheless, the persistence of identity-based approaches to explain the conflict is both conceptually unreliable and politically dangerous. It relies on a historically deterministic view of society and a rather static understanding of politics. To deny the purchase of sectarian identities in moments of insecurity and flux would certainly overlook a key dimension of Syrian politics, yet the problem lies in the attribution to such categories of primordial qualities that are postulated as innate. The sectarian narrative veils key dimensions of the conflict and further entrenches a potentially hazardous understanding of Syrian society that may hinder post-war development.

It became clear to me while living in Syria during the final months of 2010 that any clash between the government and a sizable opposition would result in a long, hard slog. Fellow students and expatriates I encountered, usually residents of upper middle-class neighborhoods in the Old City of Damascus, would regularly comment on their host families' or language professors' strong support for Bashar al-Asad. Some of our hosts would allow mild critiques of *al-ḥukūma* (the government) but rarely *al-nizām* (the governing system or regime); these criticisms were centered on the ills of corruption and nepotism, but the President was always beyond reproach, as was the nationalist ideology the ruling Ba'ṯh Party ostensibly championed. Many believed that the Ba'ṯhist regime stood for something different, that its defense of the Palestinian cause and its belief in a more equitable society (both in theory, hardly so in practice) was worthy of support and sacrifice. Proclamations of "*al-Asad ilā-l-abad* (Asad forever)," although hardly widespread, predate the current conflict.

Political indignation was not an all-pervasive sentiment. Public or private conversations were never bereft of die-hard regime supporters. The government's success in securing decent levels of societal support, aided by strategic patronage and a highly efficient *mukhābarāt* (secret service), provided all the ingredients for a drawn-out conflict. A *mêlée*, that noisy, confused fight at close quarters, where little central control exists while several levels of disorder persist, was all but pre-ordained. It is a sad outcome that few saw coming, fewer tried to avoid and none seem able to explain.

In retrospect, it is remarkable to note how few envisaged the outbreak of what just some years ago would have seemed like thoroughly implausible events. The Syrian Arab Republic, both in the scholarship and mass media outlets, appeared every bit the outdated yet impregnable bastion of Ba'ṯhism in the region. Bashar, briefly nicknamed 'The Hope,' had successfully navigated the travails of the brief Damascus Spring upon succeeding his father in 2000 and had, by late 2005, consolidated his control over Army and Party. The United States' increasingly troublesome occupation of Iraq, Hezbollah's growing strength in Lebanon and Asad's curious ability to ensure peace on Syria's border with Israel all appeared to guarantee the continuation of stable, one-party rule in the country. Yet the breezes from the Arab Spring ensured that Syria would not remain aloof from the widespread questioning of living standards and freedom enveloping the region.

The Colonial Precedent

We would be wise to remember French colonial policies in Syria, as they hold an eerie and disturbing resemblance to those executed by the Asad regime. The French were the first to employ the strategic use of divisive propaganda and ruthless violence, posing as patrons of inter-sectarian peace and sponsors of progress. But now they are no longer the only ones to

have “worked hard to sharpen the [sectarian] schism they warned of.”¹ Orders from Paris did much to favor certain communities within Syria’s complex ethnic and religious mosaic. These enflamed communal resentments that could then only be crushed at the altar of a supposedly modern, progressive secularity, a creed the current regime also enjoys defending. It is worth noting that the Asads are not the first Syrian rulers to brazenly bomb and destroy the priceless cultural relics contained in the country’s awe-inspiring cities. Like the father Hafez in Hama (1982) and the son Bashar in Aleppo (2012), the French indiscriminately shelled Damascus twice (1925 and 1945), the latter in an ultimately failed attempt at reasserting colonial control in a country they always sought to divide and control. Yet sadly, a penchant for politically motivated cruelty and a systematic disregard for the living past were not the only dangerous legacies left by the French overlords.

Much like their colonially sponsored counterparts, the Syrian Armed Forces were a tool for both promoting social division and maintaining internal security. The recruitment of religious minorities by the French was grafted upon a broad and long-standing class conflict premised on major dislocations that had been developing since Ottoman times. Absentee landlords from the cities of Latakia, Hama and Homs relied heavily on peasant labor and petty exchange from the nearby hinterlands and mountains of Jabal Ansariyya, a majority Alawite district, while urban merchants with connections to regional trade routes, mostly Sunni, controlled exchange and commerce in the bigger cities of Damascus and Aleppo. Throughout the mandate period, a multi-sectarian landed-mercantile bourgeoisie, aided by French allies, went to great lengths to ensure the submission of the rural peasantry and the complicity of the urban petty bourgeoisie.

The French imposed their preferred political and legal order in Syria, employing consistently fixed elections with a healthy dose of economic rewards to placate the country’s powerbrokers. The paternalistic pact ensured elite supremacy while excluding subaltern classes from power. To do so, “the French tapped rural patrons to do their police work...they tapped urban bosses to control the mob, and religious patriarchs to discipline their flocks.”² Little could be achieved without the support of the colonial state. Yet colonization could never be based on economic rewards alone: a healthy dose of fear was necessary. Ever weary of their Syrian allies, the French decided that in addition to the carrot, a stick was needed to ensure their loyalty. An army composed of religious minorities from the more impoverished rural areas was thought to be the best way forward.

Peasants of all religious backgrounds, many from the poorer Druze and Alawite majority districts, heeded the French call. Understandably, they saw the armed forces, largely eschewed by wealthier classes, as the only, if not ideal, means through which to improve their lives. The elites that inherited the colonial frontiers from the French upheld the unequal socio-economic system based on urban trade and large absentee landholdings. The result was an understandable radicalization of subaltern classes in the country, with the large proportion of Alawite peasants having the most to gain from the overthrow of the post-independence regime.

The Syrian Armed Forces and the Ba‘th Party: Avenues for Upward Mobility

Unsurprisingly, the armed forces would become radicalism’s hotbed. Military training academies quickly filled with rural recruits from disadvantaged areas. Once these groups penetrated the officer corps, the armed forces became a hotbed of nationalism and populist agitation, the main striking force that would, in due time, topple the old regime. The urban intelligentsia and mostly rural military elites would soon set out to overthrow the unjust

¹ Max Rodenbeck, “The Agony of Syria” in *The New York Review of Books* 59:14. (27 September 2012).

² Elizabeth Thompson *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 55-56.

order, resulting in twenty-one rebellions and coups throughout the heady decades of Pan-Arabism and Arab Socialism (1948-1970). The upheavals, often framed in the potent language of Arab nationalism prominent at the time, included actors as diverse as Nasserists, Communists and Islamists. Following a 1963 coup, it was members of the Arab Socialist Ba‘th Party who would take the lead in a very conscious attempt to overcome the political instability and social inequalities that had plagued the country.

The Party’s catchphrase for an “*Umma ‘arabiyya wāhida dhāt risāla khālida*” (One Arab Nation Bearing an Eternal Message)” employed the potent language of the Prophet Muhammad to transmit what was then a powerful message heralding a different future. In being the first openly ideological party to marry Arab nationalism with a non-Marxist socialism, Ba‘thism captivated those with a sincere interest in overthrowing the old order, its slogan of ‘Unity, Freedom and Socialism,’ promised what many Syrians desired. The Ba‘th Party was not always a vacuous means to an authoritarian end, its putsch for power in 1963 was not an Alawite power-grab, or a thinly veiled minority takeover, but a hopeful left-wing revolution of a more optimistic time. It combined the reformist, urban middle-class with rural subaltern forces seeking land reform for a destitute peasantry, along with Arab unity in search of military redemption, not deliverance premised on a sectarian mystique.

The Sectarian Specter

Conscious of this history and the classic texts that inform our understanding of Syria in this respect, one would expect a scholar with the learning of Fouad Ajami to avoid the sectarian lens that increasingly dominates news coverage of the country. He cites a central lesson from the works of Hanna Batatu and Patrick Seale concerning the initial political strategies of Ba‘thist rule: the “peasantry didn’t wield power but they were a shield of the regime and a loyal base of support. The countryside was mobilized as a counter to the traditional primacy of the cities.”³ His reading of Albert Hourani’s excellent *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* is accurate—it was France that articulated and codified a sectarian consciousness from the complexly inter-linked communities of the Ottoman period, giving such divisions further expression through Syria’s administrative organization.⁴ Division along sectarian lines was a political strategy that reinforced certain socio-economic trends; it was not a reflection of irredeemable or ever-lasting differences. Rather than following this analysis to its logical conclusions, Ajami chooses to locate sectarian divisions in an unexplained past so to assert religion’s continuing hold on the country: “These fault lines of sect and community had not gone away, and that world in Greater Syria...had not found a way out of the hold of sectarianism.”⁵

Ajami’s book is not without its strong points. He clarifies the stakes of the Syrian mêlée for regional actors and adeptly traces the paradoxical positions taken by their leaderships. He offers interesting thoughts on Turkey’s curious about-face regarding its friendship with Syria, as well as a Lebanese political class fearful of the potential blowback from its next-door neighbor.⁶ He speaks convincingly of regime attempts to neuter the Sunni

³ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2012), p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20. Under the French decree of 1924, there was a Unitary State of Syria except for the autonomous zones granted to the Alawites, the Druze and the mixed area comprising the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The separate Alawite state had a French governor until 1936 when it became part of a unified Syrian state in preparation for a Treaty of Independence that was never ratified.

⁵ Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 116.

⁶ Sadly, Ajami’s analysis of the Iraqi government’s position is not as strong. He raises the sectarian specter in his explanation of Iraqi support for Bashar al-Asad. For Ajami, it has less to do with Prime Minister Maliki’s numerous years living in exile in Damascus under Ba‘thist auspices or his shared dislike for the Gulf and Saudi monarchies than with old religious prejudices. The Syrian cities are “fortresses of Sunni Islam,” the Shi‘a of Iraq

clerical class and acknowledges, although briefly, the powerful pull of economic interests over and above religious linkages in both Sunni and Alawite camps.⁷ Yet Ajami, like the Syrian government he is so eager to condemn, is trapped in the frame of sectarianism: his analysis is colored everywhere by this problematic theoretical scaffolding. Youth unemployment, broad-based frustration at the lack of economic opportunities and feeble political rights play little if any role in his analysis of the opposition. Instead, it is about how religiously motivated “resentments were long in the making.”⁸ Syria’s opposition was not seeking freedom or dignity, simply Sunni supremacy.

In his attempt to produce a readable, op-ed style account of the war, Ajami overlooks the complexities of the conflict he seeks to describe. We get hints of intricacies, the multi-sectarian victims of repression and economic insecurity, but the sectarian framework trumps all other conceptual apparatuses, “At the heart of this fight for Syria was nothing less than ability of Sunni Islam to hold its own against the ‘compact communities’ and the rival sects.”⁹ He concludes that, “It would simplify things to depict this fight as the determined struggle of the Sunni majority to retrieve its world from minoritarian domination. But that was the truth that finally animated, and shaped, this struggle.”¹⁰ Ajami’s account not only simplifies, it misleads.

Problematizing Sectarianism

The readers of Ajami convinced of the intractable sectarian nature of the conflict would do well to read Samar Yazbek’s moving personal account of the first 100 days of the battle for Syria, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. Aided by an excellent translation from Professor Max Weiss, Yazbek’s book offers a haunting account of the eruption of protests throughout Syria’s small towns and lesser-known cities. Her diary entries are filled with detailed and evocative anecdotes. She reminds us that the rebellion needed a spark but also had long-standing sources: “Dar’a was the immediate cause while the distant ones are well known: Syria, the current situation, the state of tyranny, miserable circumstances and widespread corruption.”¹¹ She makes no pretensions at neutrality or scholarly disengagement. “Somebody has to smash the narrative of this criminal regime with the truth of the revolution. This is a revolution and not a sectarian war,”¹² she tells us.

Yazbek’s brilliance is in her prose. Her account is plain and powerful: Syrian writer Rafik Schami describes it as, “a poetic précis.”¹³ Her disbelief in the sectarian narrative proffered by the regime and numerous analysts is encouraging. Yazbek reminds us that the Alawites are indeed being persecuted, but not by the jihadists or salafis, as Bashar al-Asad would want them to believe. Instead, it is the security services and the state that hound them, intent on “making the Alawites line up behind the regime and defend it,”¹⁴ exploiting “their fears in order to stay in power.”¹⁵ Herself an Alawite from the coastal region, Yazbek’s

still see Damascus as the “seat of the Umayyad Empire.” Maliki and the “Shia political class in Baghdad couldn’t release themselves from history’s grip.” Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 107.

⁷ For Ajami’s comments on continuing poverty among certain Alawite groups see p. 73, on divisions within the Sunni merchant class see pp. 92-94. Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹¹ Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, trans. Max Weiss (London: Haus Publishing, 2012), p. 236

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 230

¹³ Rafik Schami, “Preface,” in Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, trans. Max Weiss (London: Haus Publishing, 2012), xi.

¹⁴ Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire*, p. 203.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

dissidence was neither easy nor expected. Her persecution by the security services eventually forced her to escape the country. Banished from her village and cast out by family and friends alike, Yazbek denounces the inferiority complex the regime has sought to cultivate amongst the Alawites, describing how they use the minority community as nothing more than a human shield. Irrespective of the political preferences one may have, Yazbek's book is filled with the sort of powerful stories and eye-opening narratives that are rarely heard when discussing the Syrian impasse. Her work is one of passion, bravery and defiance.

Yazbek's challenge to the sectarian narrative not only allows us to better comprehend how certain identities are mobilized in times of war; it also permits a more nuanced understanding of the current conflict's geography. Stephen Starr's *Revolt in Syria: Eyewitness to the Uprising* offers a more traditional, journalistic account of these dynamics. In the style of Kapuściński, *Revolt in Syria* offers the reader a lively text, filled with interesting anecdotes and conversations detailing the first year of the conflict. Aided by five years as a free-lance journalist based in Damascus, Starr draws on a broad array of interviewees when offering examples of the decay afflicting many of the country's institutions. His descriptions of administrative ineptitude bring to life the wastefulness of Syria's authoritarian excess, while his depiction of the country's all-encompassing security apparatus reminds us of the machinery of fear characteristic of more than one autocracy. Starr's admitted focus on Damascus has drawbacks. It carries with it an urban bias that inevitably molds the works of journalists restricted to major cities and their particular understandings of distant rural unrest. Nevertheless, the book does well in providing an array of views from ordinary Syrians. Its eyewitness reporting gives us a real sense of the hopes and fears of the capital's diverse inhabitants.

Through its early shows of strength in the spring of 2011, the regime sought to portray itself as the only force capable of ensuring stability. It forgot that the disenfranchised and dispossessed wanted nothing to do with a peace that condemned them to demoralization and dejection. For the wealthy there was more at stake, hence their passivity, or indecision, "the gap between the poor and rich in Syria was reflected markedly during the uprising by the actions of the former and the inaction of the latter."¹⁶ In Malki and Abu Roumaneh, the upscale neighborhoods of the capital, Sunni jihadism was less feared than rural revolution, a different regime meant an uncertain economic future. In a gatekeeper state, where economic advantages accrued to those close to the government, a new order meant an almost sure end to the charmed life. And Damascus was home to this carefree comfort: in recent years, international travel sections lauded the city's renewed energy and mystique, while five-star restaurants and hotels were filled not only with foreign businessmen, but their local henchmen as well. Yet one trip to the city's poor suburbs that are now hot-spots on every media outlet's Syrian maps, or the smaller cities of Dar'a, Homs, Rastan and Baniyas, (the disputed 'cribs' of the revolution), will suffice to understand that Damascus's vigor and wealth was built at their expense, the marginalization of the many ensuring the privilege of the few. Damascus was not ready for the revolt. The regime barricaded the streets and ensured the safety of its clients and elites. World audiences would not be treated to a Cairene-style *Mīdān Tahrīr*.

A Standoff Long in the Making: The History that Shapes the Mēlée

Although Starr focuses on the disconcerting calm in Damascus and the events leading to the increasing radicalization of the Syrian opposition, his book gives us an inkling of some of the long-term dynamics that have caused broad-based discontent in the Syrian Arab Republic. For a fuller, scholarly treatment of the phenomena that shaped the alliances that have

¹⁶ Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: C Hurst & Co., 2012), p. 113.

bolstered the government, and a timely theorization of the relationship between political power, economic elites and state policy, readers are best served by Bassam Haddad's *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*. Haddad, one of the earliest scholars to analyze the conflict, has sought to historicize the causes of the *mêlée* since the onset of the earliest protests in Dar'a and Homs. He is correct in claiming that "we cannot consider March 2011 to be the starting point of the unfolding events," criticizing those who neglect history at their own peril: "to discount the pre-March 2011 period is to fail to understand why after March 2011 the Syrian regime has lost its ability to govern Syria..."¹⁷ To neglect Syrian history is to risk misreading the current crisis.

The 1963-1970 period, the Syrian Ba'ath's first foray into full-scale governance, was by all accounts one of serious class conflict. Previously disenfranchised groups, with links to the Ba'ath or the armed forces, took the initiative. They gained a large stake in the new revolutionary regime, while statist economic policies and land reform left many of the wealthy landlords and influential tribal leaders in a state of relative powerlessness. Following the debilitating war of 1967, Defense Minister Hafez al-Asad and his more conservative allies sought to end the radical strategy in favor of national unity, setting off a set of clandestine intra-Party struggles. The different sides spoke to different constituencies: Syria's upper classes along with its armed forces preferred Asad, while leftist intellectuals, the peasantry and the trade unions preferred radical leader Salah Jedid. With the military's support ensured, Asad deposed Jedid and the radical faction in a 1970 coup. The conservative Thermidor had begun.¹⁸

Haddad reminds us that Hafez al-Asad's Ba'athist precursors had forever altered the class composition of Syrian society and minimized the political power of the country's wealthiest families.¹⁹ The slow destruction of the landed-mercantile bourgeoisie fostered the rise of a more autonomous and assertive state, one to which the majority were beholden for advancement. Confident of his control over the economy, Asad reached out to important segments of urban society through policies of controlled economic liberalization. He curbed the urban-rural conflict and promised what was left of the bourgeoisie an environment conducive to investment and trade. High levels of economic growth allowed Asad to broaden the social base of the regime. What power was not ensured by the appeasement of the bourgeoisie and the purge of radical forces was consolidated after Syria's participation in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which endowed the regime with an ironic nationalist legitimacy. By then, the socio-economic policies of the state ceased to work in favor of class revolution, slowly becoming a machinery of patronage and power.

In consolidating his rule after the boom of the early 1970s, Hafez al-Asad would give many of the most sensitive military positions to members of his Kalbiyya faction, one of the main tribes into which the country's Alawites are divided. External enemies abounded while internal instability was hardly a distant memory. In a highly polarized environment, Asad often relied on tribal or familial links to reinforce military cohesion, choosing loyalty over competence in his bid to consolidate power. He combined tried and tested techniques of repression with more nuanced ones, employing party ideology and nationalist discourse at the same time as force and repression. By the early 1980s state policies and corruption predictably fostered angry opponents. Discontent was simmering in many of the country's

¹⁷ Bassam Haddad, "As Syria Free-Falls... A Return to the Basics (Part 1)," *Jadaliyya* (August 31 2012) <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7147/as-syria-free-falls-.-.-a-return-to-the-basics-> (accessed 10 November 2012).

¹⁸ Raymond Hinnenbusch "Class and State in Ba'athist Syria," in *Syria: Society, Culture and Politics* ed. Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 36.

¹⁹ Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 36-60.

northern cities, where previously powerful elites found themselves disenfranchised by the growth of the state-controlled economy.

The social roots of the insurrectionary period of 1979-1982, and its culmination in Hama, came from exactly those disaffected notables and urban actors who had either never reconciled with Ba‘thist power or were increasingly angered by the regime’s patronage strategies towards its rural clients. Increasing inequality, corruption and a general economic decline led to growing unrest. The opposition’s anti-statist variant of political Islam reflected the preferences of northern Syria’s predominantly Sunni-dominated *sūq*. Ba‘thist reforms played a key part in galvanizing support for the Muslim Brotherhood, mobilizing those who had paid the heaviest costs at the hands of state policies such as the capture of foreign trade, limitations on imports and a budding state retail network.

Unlike Haddad, Ajami misreads the 1982 conflict much as he does the current stalemate. Rather than economically motivated antagonisms driving popular dissatisfaction with the regime, it is “the privileged position of the minorities” that placed the Ba‘th on “a collision course with the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathizers among the Hamawis.”²⁰ If such were the motivations of the 1982 revolt, Ajami would be hard-pressed to explain why, confident in their privilege, the Damascene bourgeoisie did not join the revolt. He would be at pains to dissect why the state bureaucracy, mostly Sunni, stood still, while many rural villages supported the regime or acquiesced with its cause, as military units mercilessly bombarded and destroyed the city. The irony of Ajami’s misreading is that it is eerily similar to the narratives proffered by the regime itself. Hafez al-Asad’s tragic mistake, like that of his son, was to equate dissidence with disdain, to depict the opposition employing the language of Islam as the vanguard of a massive Sunni conspiracy set out to overthrow his rule and massacre his religious group.

Economic Reform: A Cause for Celebration?

Haddad’s work is at its best when describing the dynamics unleashed during the late-1980s by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the onset of global neoliberalism and the inherent limits of Syria’s statist model of development. Increasing resource constraints and lack of access to foreign markets forced the regime to abandon its populist policies in favor of a stronger, although still informal, alliance with business actors. Workers and peasants were slowly cut off from networks of state support, while many among the previously disempowered rural groups joined the state-connected bourgeoisie. This shaped government policy towards distorted forms of capitalist development. Haddad focuses on the role of Syria’s business networks, defined as an “informal institutional agency with limited autonomy,”²¹ during this process. Beginning in the 1970s, mostly as small groupings bringing together state officials and select businessmen, the factions later coalesced into informal, network-like structures. He adeptly traces the networks’ disproportionate influence on state policy and carefully examines their harmful effects on Syria’s economic governance for nearly two decades. Reforms, when attempted in the 1990s, were powerfully swayed by such networks: “the resultant pattern of circumscribed liberalization produced few new winners but significantly empowered the same old winners.”²² Resulting rent-seeking and structural corruption produced a number of policies that weakened the national economy but enriched regime loyalists who had monopolized the bulk of new business opportunities. Although far from the only cause for the protests of 2011, I concur with Haddad in pointing to the deleterious

²⁰ Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, p. 85.

²¹ Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

effects of Syria's political economy as the central, albeit multivalent, structural cause influencing the politics and geography of the current conflict.²³

By the end of the twentieth century, the Syrian state had unraveled its state-centered economy and rolled back its redistributive policies, which had previously bolstered the masses' ability to deal with low levels of economic growth and corruption.²⁴ The liberalization measures that were predicted to bring democratizing effects to the country instead alienated the majority of the population, who felt most acutely the loss in jobs, welfare and public services. The result was a slow erosion of the middle class, increased poverty, the growth of the informal sector and a broadening income gap felt most acutely in rural areas and smaller cities. Economic reforms only veiled the deep discontent and increasing resentment stirring in the country.

Following the death of his father, it was Bashar al-Asad that made clear the government's desire to develop a more robust private sector. He was hardly alone in recognizing that corruption not only stagnated the economy, but also imperiled the future of the regime itself. He created the Syrian Business Council in 2007 to represent the interests of the private sector and promoted independent financial markets through the establishment of the Damascus Stock Exchange in March 2009. Yet much like his counterparts in the region, Bashar al-Asad and his advisors failed to realize that it was not crony capitalism or the unleashing of markets that Syrians pined for.

Ultimately, unequal and lopsided economic outcomes were further entrenched. Policies bolstered the unceasing emphasis on urban development, often at the expense of the countryside, an increase in the proportional size of the tourism and service sectors, mostly at the expense of manufacturing and agriculture, and a further reduction in the state's ability to even the playing field through the public provision of education and jobs. Add on to all of this the unprecedented droughts that have plagued the country since 2003, and the consequent migration of more than a million people to Syrian cities, and one may begin to surmise the economic difficulties that led many to throw their lot in with the opposition. The country's poor and youthful population was exposed to the luxuries afforded to the state-connected bourgeoisie but left without employment, without prospects and, worst of all, without hope. When the regime reared its ugly head in March 2011, with its outlandish and obscene response to the anti-regime graffiti of some youths in Dar'a, the first flame of unrest was ignited, but this was built upon the grievances that had been mounting for decades.

The Fragmented Syrian Opposition: Jihadis, Western Puppets or the Return of the Repressed?

Opposition movements, like the governments they contest, do not come bereft of history. For many years now, the presence of the Ba' thist state in neglected provinces had meant little for citizens beyond the predatory schemes of the security services or local party officials. Over the years, the regime forgot its socio-economic roots, the villages and poor towns neglected by all rulers of pre-Ba' thist Syria. A new generation of leaders, far removed from the struggles of their parents' generation, distanced the Party from the peripheral areas from which it came, too unperturbed in their luxury cars to remember those whom the Ba' thist revolution had promised to serve. It is no coincidence that rebellion broke out in the rural towns of the country: Da'ra in the agricultural plain of Hawran, Deir es-Zour on the desert

²³ For Haddad's critique of monist or sectarian accounts of the Syrian conflict that do not take into account economic, political or other structural factors see "As Syria Free-Falls... A Return to the Basics (Part 1 and Part 2)," (August 31 and October 30 2012). *Jadaliyya* <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7147/as-syria-free-falls-.-.-a-return-to-the-basics-> and http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8095/as-syria-free-falls-.-.-a-return-to-the-basics_s (accessed 10 November 2012).

²⁴ Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, pp.150-153.

frontier with Iraq and Baniyyas on the coast. It was these and similar towns in the country's rural provinces that had once been the breeding ground for members and supporters of the Ba'ath Party. Paradoxically, the Ba'athist regime was erected upon the very same provinces that were now rebelling against it.²⁵

These long-term dynamics help illustrate that the violence we are witnessing today did not begin as a Sunni day of reckoning nor as a clear-cut, predictable sectarian war, but as an upheaval of the marginalized against the privileged, of the rural areas and small cities left behind by Syria's guarded economic liberalization against those who had grown complacent on its benefits. Faced with peaceful protests and simmering discontent decrying not the state's nationalism or its position against Israel but its inability to offer the basic services the Ba'athist revolution was premised on, Bashar al-Asad, the security apparatus that surrounded him and the *awlād al-sulṭa* (sons of power) who had benefited so much from his regime, raised the specter of sectarian war. "The regime makes [the conflict] a sectarian crime between the people. It's not true," asserted Yazbek in a recent interview.²⁶ As the opposition turned to violence and the regime adopted ever crueller methods such reminders were ever more difficult to hear, or even believe.

As we contemplate the most surprising episode of the Arab Spring, the events that began as a set of peaceful protests requesting reform have transformed into an unpredictable mêlée where few know what to expect, or even who is truly in control. Bashar al-Asad had opportunities to reform, to alter the calculus of those increasingly willing to side against Ba'athist rule; if forced to depart he may look back on 2011 as a tragic year of lost opportunities. By pushing frustrated protesters and peaceful opposition groups to take up or support armed resistance, Bashar al-Asad has disfigured what was not only the greatest threat to his rule but the biggest hope for Syria's future, the grassroots non-violent movement that demanded economic opportunities, political freedoms and social change throughout 2011. Rather than reform, he chose to polarize the population and fight his own citizens, attempting to demolish any challenge to his rule. He addressed the opposition as saboteurs, terrorists and Islamists, part and parcel of a grand foreign conspiracy. He shored up his own ranks by playing on sectarian fears, arming the criminal gangs and militias known as the *shabīḥa* to ensure that such claims came to life. His unwillingness to negotiate pushed many to put up an armed response in what was an increasingly one-sided fight. By treating a majority of the Syrian people as the enemy, the Asad regime seems to have created just that—an anti-government coalition against itself that, in the end, may be too big to defeat.²⁷

Overcoming the Sectarian Temptation

Some still believe that sectarian divisions enthrall Syria, failing to see how the peaceful and armed opposition, like their counterparts that support the regime, reflect cross-cutting links that are rarely reported. Even when taking the analytical frame of sect at face value, we run into trouble. Many Alawites, especially among the poor and the professional class, have denounced the regime. The Druze are somewhat split in their views, while Christians are not the homogeneous pro-Asad sect the media portrays them as being. Sunnis are found on all

²⁵ International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution," *International Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report 108* (6 July 2011), pp. 13-14.

²⁶ Aida Edemariam, "Syria writer Samar Yazbek: 'A woman like me makes life difficult'," *The Guardian* (13 October 2012), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/oct/13/interview-samar-yazbek-syria-revolution> (accessed 2 November 2012).

²⁷ Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "Beyond the Fall of the Syrian Regime," *Middle East Research and Information Project* (24 February 2012).

sides of the opposition movement while some, most notably in the business class, remain erstwhile supporters of the regime.

This is what is wrong with the category of sectarianism and the framework it offers for analysis: it anchors opinion, dissent, indeed all political actions, in the ascriptive identity of an individual, when the meaningful struggles being waged in Syria seek to transcend such narrow identities. It represents an uncritical adoption of the colonial legacy as well as of the Ba‘thist regime’s attempt to depict the conflict, perpetuating division through a framework with little explanatory currency. Identities are numerous, mutable and created; they are neither stable nor static but constantly remade, always evolving in relation to socio-political struggles. Sect is but one of a number of cultural norms that serve as a terrain in the shifting and contingent battle over Syrian political subjectivities.

Whether Syrian society is now, after more than two years of dislocation and disturbance to normal life, better prepared to manage a transition to a new governing system, is an open question. The regime’s divide and rule tactics have undoubtedly radicalized many of its supporters along with their adversaries in the armed opposition. For now, the incredibly diverse opposition’s shared enemy has mostly precluded inter-factional violence, but we can only wonder how long this entente between such different groups can last. Ultimately, all sides, whatever they may end up looking like, will have to come to the table, for even if military victory can be claimed, no one will succeed in establishing a sustainable post-conflict polity while overlooking those who have thrown in their lot with the opposing side. And it is at this critical juncture, when sectarian narratives and analyses can do the most harm. Having already played their part in misguiding our understanding of the current conflict, and worse, increasing sectarian divisions and resentments within the country itself, they may condemn Syria to a future of irreconcilable social divisions, administrative disaster and hollow democracy. Whether avoiding this outcome is feasible remains to be seen, as it increasingly appears that the future of Syria will be decided outside the Arab Republic.

The international dimension has been crucial to the Syrian conflict, adding a complexity not seen in the other Arab uprisings due to the country’s position at the heart of numerous long-standing struggles in the region. As the *mêlée* has become more bloody and intractable, analysts have been at pains to grasp the role of external factors given the geostrategic stakes wedded to the fate of the Assad regime. For the moment uncertainty has meant mostly inaction, with suspicion of Islamist penetration and Russian intransigence in the UN Security Council ensuring that what funds and aid exist remain mostly covert. The protracted nature of the Syrian conflict and the lack of any evident exit or solution are indeed closely linked to the multiple levels on which the conflict is mired: domestic, regional and international. Although requests for foreign intervention are more than understandable, one wonders whether there is a path for such actions that will bring about minimal harm to the country’s future prospects; for as recent history teaches us, many of the international forces seeking to intervene may be “as committed as the Syrian regime itself to deny Syrians the democracy they so deserve.”²⁸ It is ultimately politics that can free Syrians from their current nightmare. We can only hope it is Syrians who make the crucial decisions that enable a sustainable political system, or they will find that their destiny has been marked out by others.

To Interpret Is to Change

Coverage of the Syrian conflict has turned from analysis to cheerleading. Groups opposing and supporting the regime have solidified into “two concrete walls, crushing both nuance and

²⁸ Joseph Massad, “The Struggle for Syria,” 15 November 2011.
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011111555722772798.html> (accessed 9 January 2012).

humanity.”²⁹ The diehard camps on each side make few distinctions between the changes constantly occurring on the ground. When contemplating the Syrian impasse, Dabashi reminds us that we should be careful not to “reduce events to cliché and imagined bifurcations,” adding that:

Political cultures are neither reducible to their constituent factors nor fixed and stagnant in history. The historical circumstances of people have primacy, not the generic abstractions that would claim them.³⁰

The narrative of sectarianism, politically engineered and employed, has never equated to a dominant or hegemonic ideology: it is predicated on a false reading of Syria’s multi-faceted political culture, which includes religion and sect but is not limited to them.

The Ba’th Party once tried, albeit half-heartedly, to supercede sectarianism with newfound political solidarities. Yet today, it seeks to undo the very successes of the past forty years, instrumentalizing sect savagely since the outset of the conflict to ensure its rule. Sectarian proclivities that have helped divide and rule will not vanish overnight, but to analyze and dissect the conflict solely along these lines is to further propagate a conceptual apparatus that distracts from the economically dysfunctional, politically alienating and violent circumstances tearing Syria apart. A manufactured sectarianism not only discredits the aspirations of those fighting, it involves a banal reification of motivations and preferences on all sides of the conflict. The stakes are important, as the notion of sectarian conflict can only blind scholars and policymakers to the complicated impacts and affects generated by the material realities of war and its aftermath.

Today we witness a *mêlée* in which ordinary Syrians are kept hostage to communal divisions and foreign power plays, where few know the true balance of forces and where ordinary Syrians fall prey to fear, depredation and violence. Such calculations are new to the opposition but hardly to Bashar al-Asad. If those who seek to replace him wish to be successful, they must reject not only his brutal means and authoritarian ends, but also his disregard of any and all dissent, and his willingness to employ the age-old colonial language of sect that entraps the Syrian conflict, and the Syrian people, within the confines of an outmoded imaginative geography. Sectarian conflict is in every respect a red herring: a strategic maneuver by certain actors to perpetuate hatreds and divisions, or the result of a sad naiveté that only serves to distract attention from the issues at stake. This narrative not only misreads the conflict and misleads the reader, it also perpetuates a conceptual apparatus that hinders the future prospects for a peaceful Syrian polity. Conflicts need reading: deciphering them is integral not only to geopolitical gambles but also to the forms of knowledge production that will help determine their outcome and legacy. “Interpreting the world is changing it”:³¹ to question sectarianism is to open up new fields of possibility and to instill hope where a sense of fatalism threatens to demolish our critical faculties. To put it more bluntly: there will be no sustainable peace or expansive post-conflict development without the construction of a new socio-political imaginary in Syria. Let us help the Syrians in this task by affirming what is today the *sine qua non* of a bone fide political act when analyzing the conflict, to reject categorically the premise of sectarianism. We have nothing to lose but our conceptual chains.

²⁹ Haddad, “As Syria Free Falls...A Return to the Basics.” *Jadaliyya* (August 31 2012).

³⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (New York: Zed Books, 2012), p. 137.

³¹ Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, p. 235.