

Syrian wars of dominance without hegemony

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The revolts or uprisings (some would even dare say “revolutions,” in parallel to the famed Iranian revolution of 1978–79; or *intifādas*, in line with the Palestinian uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s) that sprawled across the Arab world, beginning with Tunisia in December 2010 (the self-immolation of the fruit-seller Muhammad Bouazizi which set off the riots), which were soon to be seconded by Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Syria, with brief interludes in Oman, Algeria and Morocco, took everyone by surprise, including the protagonists themselves. Yet, whatever the initial judgments that may have surfaced on such events, which remain inconclusive, with no clear end in sight, opinions by laymen or pundits alike have tended to portray such revolts either as convincingly original, signaling an “Arab awakening” that is innovative in both concept and practice (“the people want their dignity and freedom”), or else as already aborted attempts, which could not possibly expunge in one stroke decades of abrasive and immature political practices, even though much of the events are still unfolding in real time and on our TV monitors, to dislodge authoritarian régimes that have been set in motion in the wake of the Second War World and decolonization.

Rethinking the Arab revolts

The collapse of the old Ottoman order, in its political and cultural connotations, established, amid the Sykes–Picot agreements in 1916, a British–French colonial order, which meant moving, quite abruptly, from Empire to nation-state. New states with hastily drawn “borders” (“lines in the sand”) were thus formed, such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait, whose territories were previously set within the “frontiers” of a multi-ethnic empire. The post-Ottoman colonial order was therefore the *first* attempt in the modern era of the nation-state to have delved into that awkward territory of a sovereign state, with clearly defined national boundaries, in conjunction with a national bourgeoisie of rentiers, manufacturers and financiers (the ex-Ottoman urban notables), which inevitably dominated politics and government. This liberal order of the colonial powers, which coopted the nascent national bourgeoisie into its ranks, persevered until the Second World War. The first indication of the dislodgment of such political and economic order was, indeed, the Free Officers revolution in Egypt in 1952. We can already discern with that single event the social roots of an upcoming *second* political and economic order, which still dominates the region until now, and which apparently the current revolts are attempting to extricate. But is the Middle East at large ready for a *third* order? With Gamal Abdul Nasser coming to power in 1952, Egypt would take a series of statist measures that would ultimately establish themselves as a blueprint for the Arab world at large: the undermining of the power of the colonial bourgeoisie by means of

actions that expropriated their rural, urban, manufacturing, financial and educational assets; which led to the establishment of an economy dominated by the state, and where the state's security was anticipated not only by means of an ever growing army, but also thanks to paramilitary groups, intelligence services, whose ranks and effectives have been continuously swelling.

The dismantlement of the colonial liberal order was therefore quick to happen, and in Egypt that burst of stability was already fully reversed by the mid-1950s: by then Egypt, the most populous Arab country, was running under a massive civil and military bureaucracy where the role of the military (as epitomized by Nasser himself) and intelligence services had become paramount; where education and the economy were fully dominated by the statist bureaucracy; and where the peasantry, looked upon as suspicious for its conservatism and subjection to old "feudal" landlord families, was subject to constant political mobilization. Such drastic measures, irreversibly anti-liberal, would serve as blueprint for the rest of the Arab world, and by the late 1950s other Arab countries would follow suit. In 1958 the coup of Abdul-Karīm Qasim, another disgruntled officer, placed a sudden and bloody end to the rule of the Hashimite monarchy which had been ruling Iraq since the 1920s, that is, since its inception by the British in the aftermath of the First World War (the same Hashimites are still in power in neighboring Jordan). In 1963 the Baath Party came to power in both Iraq and Syria, whose rule had been further brutally consolidated in the 1970s with Hafiz al-Asad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In 1969, a coup led by an unknown and young officer by the name of Mu'ammār al-Gadhafi, deposed the long and stable rule of the Idrissi monarchy in Libya. By 1978–79 this "second political and economic order" was sealed and further consolidated thanks to the Iranian revolution, which terminated Pahlavi monarchism, and its association to Shi'ism since the early sixteenth century, instituting an Islamic Republic for the first time in the Middle East and West Asia.

This brief recapitulation should only serve to remind us of the frailty of the colonial bourgeois liberal order that was established in the wake of the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire: if such form of government had been reversed all too easily, in a series of coups d'états across the region, and through blunt statist measures intended to weaken the private national economies, it was only because of the puniness of that mandate, which could be attributed to Ottoman times, and to the way the old élites, appended with new professional groups, were integrated into the colonial economy. To begin with, the Ottoman political patrimonial order implied maintaining a close hand on the prebendal urban élite (the *a'yān*) through stipends in the form of land rents; but even though the ownership was formally to the sultan and the state, the notables enjoyed de facto full possession, giving them that special status group (*Stände*) of rentiers without, however, much competition from any local or regional economic group. Even though some of the *a'yān* invested in activities other than land, such as trade and manufacturing, land was their prime resource. More importantly, the *a'yān* as the prime status group in society was neither an "aristocracy" per se nor assigned any *political* role within their community, beginning with the city which they were supposed to "represent."

Indeed, Ottoman absolutism precluded the formation of local aristocracies, leaving all “political representation” to the center.

The Syrian paradox

With the colonial nation-state now a reality, that old order was not completely dislodged, however, but was rather beefed up with all kinds of new forces and realities. Let us consider Syria as an example to interruptions in political formations. To begin with, land rent now intermixed with manufacturing, trade and finance: the old rentiers have learned how not to make land their sole asset (even though some families never learned the lesson, and eventually declined once land became a reform target of the independent postcolonial state). Secondly, new middle class professional groups, not to mention the *nouveaux riches*, all of which benefited from the openings of colonialism, and the special attention that the latter accorded to “minorities” (Christians, Armenians, Jews, Kurds and Alawis), were now appended to the old rentiers, sharing a great deal of the commercial and manufacturing wealth of the mandate period. Thirdly, the deeply-rooted élites, in conjunction with new entrepreneurial groups, formed political parties, participating in governmental activities, from the presidency, parliament, and cabinet positions. As a newly formed nation-state, Syria now thought of itself as a territory with internationally acknowledged borders, rather than as a “province” appended to a multi-ethnic empire. But this also implied seeking for a certain degree of *homogeneity*, which was not there in the world of Empire. The heterogeneous nature of Syrian society was soon to be set on a couple of pitfalls. First, the mandate inherited the Ottoman patrimonial *millet* system, whereby “communities” lived on their own, in specific neighborhoods of the city, with their own schools, businesses, and “representatives” protecting their rights. Second, the nation-state implied the formation of a *single* political territory, which de facto entailed a minimum degree of cohesiveness among regions. In the Ottoman system, the central axis of the four major Sunni cities of Damascus, Hims, Hama, and Aleppo, was the one which consolidated the core of the traditional rentiers class, the manufacturing of the craft guilds, linking the trade routes and their merchant classes from Jerusalem to Baghdad and beyond. With the newly formed nation-state that core economic axis had to be attached with two additional ones: the western Mediterranean strip of Banyas, Jableh, Tartus and Latakia (the predominantly Alawi mountainous and coastal regions), and the northern-eastern region of Hasakeh, Qamishli and Dayr al-Zor. It is safe to say that all Syria’s modern history hinges, on the one hand, on the relations between the confessional groups, through the established economic domination of Sunnis and Christians, and, on the other hand, on the imbalance between the main central axis of the four major cities and the two regional axes affixed to them.

To proceed a bit rapidly, it is no secret that the structure of the pro-military factions that downsized the traditional political and economic groups since the 1963 Baath coup, were small to middle class landowners from rural areas. Indeed, the Baath was supposed to bridge that gap between landlord and peasant, city and countryside, the core Sunni axis of the four

major cities with the western coastal and mountainous areas, and the north-east. The agrarian reforms of 1963–69 did some of that, by dispossessing big landlords, and transforming peasants into small landlords, with various laws making it harder for the landlord to evict tenant-farmers and laborers. At the same time, the economic assets of what became in the liberal period the “bourgeois middle class” were nationalized in an apparent attempt to consolidate the state monopoly over the economy and its national resources. Quite rapidly, therefore, the early pre-Asad Baath managed to downsize landowning, manufacturing, and financial middle classes from their core assets, which in itself was a blunt attempt to downsize them politically in favor of the one-party system that was yet to come. The Syrian paradox—or exception—would consist precisely in the return of the power groups that were weakened in the 1960s. This would take place in the coming decades on a couple of occasions. When Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970 in the wake of a coup d’état against his early Baathist companions, he inaugurated what was then dubbed as the “rectification movement,” which in essence meant “correcting” the “extremes” of the early Baath. Such overture bluntly favored a re-opening towards old Sunni and Christian professionals who dominated the “national”⁴ economy; but even though they were openly scoured to reinvest in core economic activities (such as textiles, food and chemicals), they did so only reluctantly, leading the whole “rectification movement” into a downward spiral from which it never recovered. However, by the 1990s and later the grip of such “liberal” groups over the *private* sector was willy-nilly honored, consolidating an uncanny return to the 1950s, even though new families had joined in in the interim.

The problems that we have rapidly exposed could be foreseen on the ground of the current unfolding wars, without end in sight. Even though the uprisings across the region may have shared some common ground, each one, once set within its social and political parameters, stands on its own. The “Syrian revolt,” whose fateful date was set for March 18, 2011, when a small group of youngsters in the southern city of Dar‘a, bordering Jordan and Israel, filled the walls neighboring their school with graffiti urging “the fall of the corrupt régime,” already points to the marginalization of rural communities under the Baath. Undoubtedly, those youngsters had no political agenda per se, as they were simply embodying—or mimicking—what they had been watching with their parents on their satellite dishes for months in neighboring Arab countries. Such a gesture embodies the *jouissance* in every mimetic act: firstly, those kids were *repeating* what others of similar or different generations were performing across the Arab landscape; secondly, repetition engenders difference to concrete situations: such mimetic act provoked the authorities to their arrest, prompting their families to seek forgiveness from the mighty *mukhābarāt*, the intelligence services; thirdly, it was the mothers who showed up at the offices of the intelligence services, urging them to vindicate their kids from any wrongdoing. When the mothers were greeted with sexual innuendos, it was more than enough to set the spark across town for the uprising. Notwithstanding economic factors, a deeply religious community like Dar‘a, where women are at the same time dominated and urged by their community to go public to seek the release of their kids, exhibits the contradictions that rural Syria has been honoring for a long time. On the one

hand, such rural areas are poised for more aggressive agricultural production and land ownership, which are handicapped by the state's monolithic control of the economy, and on the other hand, they are regulated by tightly controlled customary norms of their own making outside state control.

A crisis of representation

Even though the current conditions are very much different from nineteenth-century Europe, I find a conspicuous parallel between the Arab revolts with post-Napoleonic Europe in 1815–1870, with the 1848 transitional crisis in between, in at least one respect. With the loss of a center of power in the figure of the monarch, the French Revolution had ushered a complete *crisis of representation*: instead of a monarch “embodying” the will of his “subjects,” modernity in revolutionary France and Europe implied popular participation and representation. Thus, in the wake of the Revolution, the major transformation consisted in bourgeois empowerment *without popular participation*, and an economic loss of privileges for the aristocracy without its total extinction. The goal was therefore impeding the French revolutionary model, which required the gradual absorption of antagonistic elements in society, while leaving the question of representation up for grabs (even though the Revolution adopted universal male suffrage, but its effective application in France and Switzerland was left to the aftermath of the 1848 revolts), which culminated in incomplete revolutions (what Antonio Gramsci had dubbed as the “passive revolution”). To elaborate, a concept of civil society matured in Europe in parallel to the notion of *political society*, that is, the sphere where society organizes to shape state policies but also to define the nature of the state and political unity. Indeed, political society is what integrates people into the state and makes them citizens.

The parallelisms between nineteenth-century Europe and the Arab world today could be narrowed down to its most striking element, namely, the crisis of representation. Arab “societies” are typically described as lacking the “civil” element into them, that is, there is a “society” without a “civil society.” The prolonged era of dictatorships, which far from being over, led to a poor system of representation for the social groups which have evolved since the demise of the Ottoman era and decolonization: liberals, nationalists, communists, Islamists, and workers organizations, have been routinely suppressed to give place to the one-party ideological template inaugurated by Nasser in Egypt in 1952 and reproduced in other Arab countries. As a result, Arab societies suffer from a poor articulation between what forms civil society per se—everyday routine, the use of space, and economic experience—and the political sphere.

I. A representative state without politics: Syria as an authoritarian dictatorship

Considering that the problems in Syrian society have been *longue durée* and chronic in their nature, it does not make much sense to look for any “beginning” of the current civil war in terms of deeply-seated causal elements. We relate the question of beginning to that of the

imaginary: Syrians, like the rest of the Arabs, and the world at large, have been throughout 2011 consuming images of civil strife on their TV, computers, tablets and smartphone monitors. Such images have put on hold, at least temporarily, the authority and prestige of the state in the Arab world, the rule of dictators, as it is commonly known. Such prestige and authority is particularly vital for authoritarian, fascist, or totalitarian states and societies. That is to say, a great deal of what constitutes “society” does not come from its inner sense of “cohesion,” associations, cooperatives, chambers of commerce, trade, and labor, political parties, free elections, and vibrant parliamentarianism. By the 1960s, amid the failure of the Union with Egypt and the botched experience of the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.), Syria had set itself, to get out of its social and political crisis, at establishing, in line with neighboring Iraq and Egypt and other Arab states, a representative state without politics: an authoritarian dictatorship.¹

Intraclass hegemony in Syria since the mandate was weakly developed. Instead of a solid alliance forming between landed and moneyed interests, the Syrian social élite, which was mostly Sunni and contained along the Sunni urban axis of Damascus, Hims, Hama, and Aleppo, remained fragmented into territorially defined interest groups. Organizationally and ideologically it was never a national ruling class, a situation that it had inherited from Ottoman times through the combination of the patrimonial millet and a’yān systems. In effect, the urban a’yān, whatever their merits or downsides, ruled in their own city and on its associated countryside, receiving their “income” primarily through state-tax prebends. Hence they had little contact, if at all, with other cities and regions, as they remained for the most part totally local. As de facto “landowners,” they derived their legitimacy from a combination of positions: that of being the prebendal tax assignees of the sultan, collecting taxes, surtaxes, rents, and fees from lands whose *raqaba* (“neck”) belonged to the sultan, his state, and bureaucracy; to which was associated their status as ulama, leaders of the community, and at times, merchants, and guild managers.

With the French mandate and the new land laws, what was de facto land “ownership,” became de jure possession, thanks to new land laws in the early 1930s. But the social élite remained as fragmented as ever, working its “politics” on a city-by-city basis, as if the “national” territory did not exist. Two unprecedented factors would contribute further at the destabilization of the social élite, which led to its losing political power in 1963. First of all, the rapid urbanization of Syria and its opening towards regional and international trade of the Mediterranean; the opening of public schools at a massive level, which provided education for the popular and middle classes alike, beyond the traditional Islamic madrasa system; and the investment of landed capital in manufacturing and financial projects, had all contributed in toto towards the formation of a professional middle class, mostly Sunni (from the Damascus–Aleppo commercial axis), albeit where Christians, Armenians, and Jews, had more economic

¹ Dylan Riley, *The civic foundations of fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

and cultural weight, and dispensed with more expertise, than what their numerical value would suggest. Second of all, Syria was now “one nation” with a parliament whose members were elected by the people, with an army and police force, and where the tribal *‘ashāyir* enjoyed a status of their own, by having their own “laws” and “group” in parliament.

On both counts there was a failure to create a “national political culture” that would have absorbed the regional fragmentation of the élites and their masses of people. Thus, on the first count, the rapid urbanization, the spread of education and the use of common utilities like affordable housing, water and electricity, which were no more mere luxuries, and the coming of women in the work force, contributed to the formation of a professional middle class outside the scope of the traditional a’yān. The latter remained, however, fragmented, failing even to form alliances with their own middle classes, hence they overall missed a golden opportunity to renovate intraclass integration, to the point that the notion of a “Sunni majority without political power” was always, throughout Syrian history since the mandate, a meaningless expression. The so-called “Sunni majority” never had a sense of intraclass integration, its élites and middle classes were fragmented regionally, hence lacked a cultural personality and coherence.

Which brings us to the second count. The becoming of Syria a nation-state, with a parliament, army and police force, exposed even further the structural weaknesses of the fragmented ruling class. The two main political formations, the National Bloc (*kutla waṭaniyya*) and the People’s Party, never had a national audience, as they were rooted in their respective cities, Damascus and Aleppo respectively. Parliamentary elections pointed to the fact that such blocs and parties worked with constituencies that were local, privileging the urban electorate over the rural; Damascus and Aleppo over Hims and Hama; and where entire regions, such as the Jazira or the Mediterranean coast and its mountains, or the tribal areas in the east, were marginalized, with a leadership that lacked the prestige of those in Damascus and Aleppo.

With the withdrawal of the French in the mid-1940s, and the stagnation of political life since then, the army took habit since 1949–1952 of forcing itself into politics. The unfortunate Union with Egypt was the stepping stone that was much needed by the “progressivist” parties to come to power in 1963, prior to establishing their stronghold on the army and party politics. The Union also introduced, for both Egypt and Syria, the notion of massive state ownership of expropriated capital (landed properties, firms, media); the rule of intelligence services and the mukhābarāt; and the one-party system. In sum, state fascism was already there in the works.

In the 1940s and 1950s the moribund “politics” of the Sunni Damascus–Aleppo axis was unable to create a national ruling class, as it remained rooted in its urban territories of Sunni predominance. Thus, not only intraclass hegemony failed, due to territorial divisions (which acted even more strongly than anything religious), but even interclass hegemony became impossible. The rapid pace of urbanization and public and private education led to an equally rapid expansion of a middle class of urban professionals, and more importantly, the

development of civil society with the sprawling of *nawādi*, *jam‘iyyāt* and *ta‘āwuniyyāt*, that is, all kinds of associations, cooperatives and unions, which were for the most part gender and class segregated, whose aim was no less than to take care of the collective labor and economic and political interests of their members. However, the development of civil society in this moribund political context, far from strengthening political institutions, undermined them.

Nor was the attempt to bypass a fragmented political life limited to the free associations. In effect, at the margins of the big parties, blocs, and coalitions, other parties saw light, which attempted to act within a “national” framework. But those were of such a different nature, however, to the point that in themselves they became a problem, which pushed the fragmentation of the major Sunni formations even further, leading to both the events in 1958–1961, and 1963. It was as if the 1961–1963 brief “liberal” interlude was the much needed “evidence” that the old “politics of the notables” was finally over.

In the old system, which was inherited from the mandate, parties that designated themselves as “progressivist” or otherwise filled the margins of the traditional party and bloc politics of the Damascus–Aleppo axis, were the ones to ultimately destabilize the traditional order. Four stood out in particular, but failed to achieve any “national” constituency, as if they were caught in the same dilemma as their old peers: the Baath under the leadership of Michel ‘Aflaq (a Greek-Orthodox), the socialists under Akram Hourani, the Muslim Brothers under Muṣṭafa Sibā‘ī, and the communists under Khaled Bekdash (a Kurd). One can see here the role of “minorities,” which resonates well with the “minorities” in the army leadership which had allegedly paved the way for the troubled 1949–1953 coups interludes.

To be sure, such parties operated under very different platforms, to the point that even the much demanded and controversial “agrarian reforms” did not unite such “margins” in any way. If anyone championed the agrarian reforms it was indeed Akram Hourani who strongly believed that a limit must be placed on large property holdings, which varied considerably from one region to another, and fluctuated from province to another. Apparently, even the Baath was not that adamant at distributing expropriated property to the landless peasantry; and while the communists were opposed to it, the Brotherhood for its part saw in it an act of “socialism,” reflecting the fact that a large chunk of the Brotherhood itself was formed of “old class” landowners.

The point here is that such parties failed to create a viable national platform, one that would have stood as an alternative to traditional party and bloc politics as inherited from the mandate. They all fought parliamentary elections city by city but with limited success, and great variation. For example, Akram Hourani and his cohorts of socialists and “free young students” managed well in Hama since 1943, Hourani’s home base, but they encountered problems expanding their constituency to Aleppo and the capital Damascus. While pushing hard for their “progressive” land reforms, the “comrades” behind Hourani found themselves trapped in battles with landlords in the Hama countryside and elsewhere that they

condescendingly dubbed as the “reactionary feudal élite,” which halted their expansion even in regions that should have been friendly, such as Jabal al-Zāwiyah and the Idlib countryside. In the final analysis, it is, indeed, significant that the much demanded agrarian reforms only materialized in the “revolutionary” era of the Union, and later under the Baath, not under parliamentary “liberalism.” Indeed, the liberal parliament seized the 1961–1963 interlude to scrap off the land reforms of the Union. We now know, amid over half a century of agrarian reforms in the works, that what the likes of Hourani had dubbed as “the reactionary feudal class” is still there in force, notwithstanding that large parts of the peasantry benefited by landowning properties that had been expropriated from big landowners. The lesson to learn from such episode is that the consolidation of big properties—“feudalism”—has managed to ascertain itself under the “liberal” formulations of the “old classes,” and within the authoritarian dictatorship of the Baath, even after the latter managed to revamp and “rectify” itself in the 1970s. In both instances, we will argue, there was a failure of hegemony at all levels. There was already a lack of civil associationism in the countryside, whether intraclass associations among the peasants, or interclass, between the peasants, tenant farmers, and landlords, which created an atmosphere in the 1960s, 1970s, and later of politicized “from the top” “cooperatives” (*ta‘āwuniyyāt*) supposed to give their loyalty to the Asad régime, but devoid of any politics.

The failure of hegemony leads, following Ranajit Guha’s famous expression on British (and Indian) colonial politics, to dominance without hegemony.² When the Baath came to power in 1963, the event was in itself one of those exercises of pure dominance, as small groups of army officers supported by civilian party members assumed power by sheer force. As the group itself was made up of heterogeneous groups divided along sectarian, ethnic, and regional lines, not to mention incompatible ideological and religious affiliations, to be able to survive on the long run, it had to progressively clean itself through several purges, the last of which was the “rectification” movement of the 1970s, which consolidated the Asad clan not only at the expense of the other Sunnis and Christians, but also by marginalizing the other ‘Alawi factions represented by Yusuf Zu‘ayyin and Salah Jadid. One should not, however, hasten to read in such episodes the defects of “sectarianism” in Syrian society and politics, as we will argue more in the direction of class hegemony, or the lack thereof. The “purification” of the Baath into a team composed of a single sectarian clan on the top, which “recruited” others loyal to its principles and practices, manifests the impossibility of a hegemonic culture under such political conditions, rather than simply religious sectarianism or regionalism at works.

Up to the coming of the Baath, Syria had very little, if at all, mutual aid societies, rural credit organizations, and cooperatives in its countryside, even along the Sunni Aleppo–Damascus commercial axis. Indeed, beginning with the mandate and the introduction of liberal

² Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Harvard University Press, 1997.

parliamentarianism and the party system, peasants and workers in the countryside were asked to vote, join a party or bloc, without having learned how to “associate” in the first place. The various “revolts” that plagued the Syrian “nation” in the mid-1920s soon lost their “national” appeal and fragmented regionally. In the parliamentary elections, the attempt to bypass the “corporatist” politics of the major parties and blocs by Baathists and socialists alike soon turned their attention to the countryside, the peasants and workers in particular, on the basis that they had everything to win from the dismantlement of big properties, and nothing to lose. Hourani’s socialists in particular developed hostility towards tribes and tribal factions, which they wanted to bring under civil and penal laws, but which otherwise were hostile to agrarian and other “class” reforms.

It was precisely such infrastructural weaknesses that the Baath took advantage of so easily—reforms “from the top,” as usual, whereby all kinds of credit and mutual aid cooperatives were formed “in the name” of the peasants and their workers: a politicized maneuver to win support of a fragmented populace of the countryside, but, in the final analysis, without politics. In sum, such practices failed to produce associational growth.

What we therefore need to question are the consequences of Syria’s dominant classes failure to establish intraclass hegemony. Such concern has been addressed in auto-biographies and memoirs of Syria’s two most prominent politicians of the “liberal” period: Khalid al-‘Azm and Akram Hourani. Thus, while ‘Azm realized the weaknesses of the “old classes,” to which he belonged, he sought various bloc alliances not only with members of his “own class” in Hims, Hama, and Aleppo, but went as far as opening up to the communists and brotherhood, and at the international level to the USSR. Hourani by contrast worked the absence of class strategy among Syria’s political élite in terms of interclass solidarity, hence his insistence to promote fair agrarian reforms that would create a landholding peasantry: that was probably Hourani’s sole “socialist” message, which in the wake of the barriers placed by the “old classes,” pushed the likes of Hourani into a Union with Egypt that served as a stepping stone for the Baathist takeover.

The various “liberal” cabinets and parliaments of the Mandate and independence, up to 1958, provided for public health, distributed public works, were in charge of the schools, and deployed the police and the army. They also controlled the right of assembly and kept a sharp eye on associations, which were protected in the civil code of 1949, a right that was lost in the Union when several articles of the code were abrogated. Sitting atop these myriad local despots of the “old classes,” parliament functioned as a deal-making forum for élite interests, which was dominated by the National Bloc in Damascus and the People Party in Aleppo. The Brotherhood, socialists, Baathists, and communists, all attempted in the 1940s and 1950s to gain some “national” ground, to no avail, as they remained limited to the local constituencies from which they had originated. Which led the Baath and socialists to combine in the early 1950s under the banner of the “Arab Baath socialist party,” “dissolving” themselves as parties for the sake of the Union, thereby seizing power in 1963 via a military coup. As no political

parties existed to aggregate interests at a national level, the expansion of suffrage in order to include the popular classes of peasants, workers, and unionists, would not help much, considering the weaknesses of associationism at this level. The popular classes, in particular those in the countryside, and those who moved to the city and were the source of cheap labor, were often at the mercy of their kin and family networks, and at times of much broader tribal formations, which were not particularly “nationalistic” in their outlook. Socialists of the like of Hourani reasoned in terms of hitting hard on such “regressive” and “reactionary” bonds, which were incompatible with the modern nation-state, urging parliament since the 1940s to pass a “law of the tribes” that would not give tribal factions any privileges, forcing them to abide by the standards of the Syrian civil and penal codes, with the hope that their own customary laws would be once and for all undermined. The problem with such top-down approach is that ultimately it succeeds at installing itself through sheer military power, as the episode of the Union testifies, which led to the coming of the Baath.

Syrian governments were not voted in office, but were rather formed in parliament through processes that took advantage of the lack of coherence and hegemony among the cultural and political élite, hence included members from all over the spectrum, in an attempt to “pacify” incompatible programs and interests. Prime ministers and cabinet positions were determined by postelectoral deals rather than through competition among competing programs in the country. This had a corrosive impact on the formation of parties, because it undermined the context of institutional struggle within which political organizations form. This method of constituting governments worked best when deputies were relatively independent of party organizations so that they could be available for deal making. From the very beginnings of the unified state under the Mandate, liberal institutions were imposed from above, not only on the population broadly, but also on local élites themselves. As blocs tended to predominate over party formations, socialists, Baathists, communists, and Islamists, were unable to break the traditional party and bloc alliances.

II. The expropriation of agrarian properties

It is well known that Syria and other Arab countries like Iraq and Egypt had to cut off the roots of their “big landowners” artificially, through various land and agrarian reforms, beginning in the late 1950s, with the unfortunate Union between Syria and Egypt. Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi attempted to do the same but a bit later, in the so-called “white revolution” of 1961–62, which was an outcome of pressures from the Kennedy administration. In the Iranian case, however, the “agrarian reforms” had apparently substantially damaged the ownership of the Shi‘a clergy, the ulama class which in this instance did not live from state-owned waqf properties, but from landed properties that were *personally* rather than collectively owned. Which may have led to the beginning of the rise of Khomeini from his exile in Iraq in the 1960s, and his coming to power in 1979. Turkey, however, did not artificially cut off its landowners, which represents a case of its own in middle east history, as the profitability of landed properties became gradually marginalized with the push towards industrialization in

the 1940s and 1950s and later. Moreover, in the Turkish case, the military did not initiate any land reforms; their access to power was intermittent, bringing back civilian rule whenever military might proved inefficient or unpopular.

In sum, in the cases of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, to name only some of those who went through agrarian reforms, the reforms were initiated by régimes backed by the military and by “populist” parties, hence power was seized by force, reversing decades of parliamentarianism and liberalism.

The scope of such reforms is well known, primarily to distribute property “fairly” among the landless and dispossessed peasants, by confiscating the large properties of the “old classes,” which had inherited their estates from Ottoman times and the Mandate which was “soft” on ownership. The bigger aim, however, was not ownership per se, as much as the target was, indeed, the *class* of landowners, capitalists, manufacturers, and middle class professionals in general. The “old classes” survived for the most part from prebendal taxes (surtaxes, dues, and fees) and rent assignments, hence did not “possess” the deeds to the assigned properties. But the fact that they did not “own” these properties did not mean that they did not de facto “possess” them. Even before the 1858 Land Code, which did not authorize “possession” but only required registration for the right of usufruct, there was, indeed, de facto possession, as the prebendal assignments, which usually lasted for decades for a single family, became synonymous with possession and not simply usufruct, where the *raqaba*, “neck,” was for no one else but his majesty the sultan. Those were the miri lands of the sultan, which the Mandate did not abolish, even though the fragmentation of the Empire created autonomous sovereign states, which in the case of Syria, amounted to a parliamentary Republic, modeled after the French third republic. The point here is that by not abolishing the miri, and replacing the title with either state-owned public property, or else private property, the Mandate created an enormous confusion which still perseveres until today.

The point here is that the “old classes” became full-blown owners, whether their properties were registered as miri or milk. Some exploited their rents into trade and manufacturing, while others went into politics and became parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, or even prime ministers and presidents. It was that kind of class configuration, which in spite of the army imposing itself into politics since 1949, would only begin to lose momentum with the unfortunate Union with Egypt. The agrarian reforms gave it that final blow from which it never recovered.

Which social relations are in need of documentation when it comes to agrarian relations? The emphasis here should be on “relations,” and not simply “production.” Production is inscribed in the peasant household, and agrarian relations since Ottoman times have been known for the weaknesses of their social bonds, as there is neither any civil nor political community to protect the interest of workers, their livelihood, property and family. In some ways they are no different from their urban counterparts, which for the most part are not organized into

unions, lack any sense of autonomy, and end up “approached” by political parties (assuming there are ones that do not operate under the aegis of the state) for the sake of “representation.” Thus, urban and rural workers, even though the two categories are kept separate, end up being bullied by “corporatist” endeavors of political parties or the state.

The state in Syria first imposed itself since the Union with Egypt as a tool to expropriate wealth holders. Expropriation implies an entire discourse which touches on the sovereignty of the nation in its struggle against colonialism and imperialism; that private property may represent a danger to society if not tamed with the higher virtues of socialism and freedom; that the economy of the nation should always operate within the framework of principled multi-year economic plans, known as strategic planning; and, last but not least, the nation, which operates within the framework of pan-Arabism and the Arab umma, is “guided” by the One (and only) Party, even though other parties may be “affiliated” to this Oneness. Like every discourse, there is an element of unsaid to it, and here the *non-dit* is essentially the class, ethnic, and religious configurations of the country which remain for the most part “hidden,” as if their ultimate non-“resolution” would be thwarted by what the One Party has to offer. The Party would do what ultimately Ottomans and French were unable to do, adding to the vulnerability of an already explosive situation. Thus, it was already bad with the Ottoman *millet* system, but the French flared even worse by “investing” in some “minorities” against others, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, not to mention tribes and tribal factions, and others.

When the Baathist state in the mid-1960s pursued its polity of wealth expropriation of the big landowners, within the politics of the “agrarian reforms” which were inaugurated under the Union, it aimed at sapping manufacturing, industrial, and financial capital at the same time, with the knowledge that in an agrarian country like Syria, all such capitals are conspicuously tied together, like a child in his mother’s womb. Soon, the “ideological” foundations of those same classes were also sapped, with education becoming for the most part public.

Until the severe drought of 2007–2010 Syria was auto-sufficient in its food production and the export of cotton, which on its own formed one-third of all national exports. Strongly subvented and protected by the state (state farms, cooperatives, and loans advanced to needy peasants, not to mention the imposition of prices and limits imposed on some exports and imports), agriculture contributed to one-fourth of the GDP (or GNP), while preoccupying, in relation to the agrarian food sector, one-third of the active population. Agriculture had permitted maintaining half of the population in rural areas (52 percent in 2004). Amid the agrarian reforms in 1958, 1963, and 1966, which were unequally applied from one region to another (in the Jazira, which produces 70 percent of all grains, only one-third of the lands were concerned), the essential of agricultural production remained in private hands. The public sector, which for the most part consisted of public farms and cooperatives, was for all purposes practically moribund in 2000: weak production cycles, corruption, inability to create a rural “society” that would “integrate” tribal relations. In consequence the first measure of liberalization adopted by Bashshār al-Asad, once he came to power in June 2000, was to

abolish the state farms and have their properties redistributed to the old landowners, workers, and employees (decision 83 in 16 December 2000).³

It goes without saying that the decline of Syrian agriculture precedes the drought of 2007–2010, primarily in the number of workers, which went from a high of 1.4 million active workers in 2004 to 800,000 in 2008. Which prompted a new law in 2004 which went into effect in 2007, and whose purpose was precisely to “renovate” investments by bypassing old contracts and encouraging new ones on short durations, leading to the expulsion of hundreds of tenant farmers and workers.

The agrarian sector was therefore in full crisis mode at least since 2000, as an outcome of the high parceling of properties, the lack of funds, state intervention, becoming tragic, and prompting humanitarian aid with the drought of 2007–2010 to the present. An estimated 100,000 families a year have been affected by the drought, or a million persons, half of which are from the province of Ḥasakeh, where half of the Kurdish population lives. This was made worse thanks to a decree promulgated in 2008 which freezes all land sales near the Turkish border, making it the largest migration movement in Syrian history, and one of the largest in the middle east, prior to the current civil war. Migrants moved for labor to places as diverse as Ṭarṭūs on the Mediterranean, and Dar‘a in the south, the 100,000 plus town that sparked the civil war in March 2011.

We will follow here the view of some observers who noted how much the reforms introduced in 2000 contributed more in the parceling of agrarian properties, in combination with the forced planning in some sectors, and the near-impossibility of selling land near the Turkish border.

The first paragraph of Law 134 of 1958 boldly announces that the main objective of the new law was “to regulate the agrarian relations among the parties engaged in agricultural work, so that the land of the nation (*arḍ al-waṭan*) would be placed in value in a much more efficient way, and to establish equitable economic and social relations.”

By contrast, Law 56 of 2004 (amended by Law 12 of 2011) abandons any reference to the *waṭan* to underscore economic development, *tanmiya*, which undeniably is a concession to a mixed market dominated by forms and practices of crony capitalism. Thus, the purpose of the new law according to the text itself, would be “*istithmār al-arḍ bi-ṣūra ṣāliḥa li-tanmiyat al-tharwa al-qawmiyya wa iqāmat ‘alāqāt iqtisādiyya wa ijtimā’iyya ‘ādila*,” which translates as “to invest in the land in a positive way, so that the national wealth develops, and to achieve an equitable and just economic and social relations.”

³ Myriam Ababsa, “Crise agraire, crise foncière et sécheresse en Syrie (2000–2011),” in Élisabeth Longuenesse and Cyril Roussel, eds., *Développer en Syrie. Retour sur une expérience historique*, Les Cahiers de l’ifpo 08, Études contemporaines, Beirut: Presses de l’ifpo, 2014, 111–134.

It is well known that the agrarian reforms of 1958, 1963 and 1966 have much contributed at reducing the power of the large landowners, profiting in the meantime to the average peasants, which were susceptible at “endorsing” the two Asad régimes.

What needs to be investigated, however, is precisely all these categories of large landowners, middle class peasantry, and supporters of the régime. Regarding the latter, what are the mechanisms of support? What is an average peasant, and how did his status improve? The purpose of all this is to see if in all this process there is a “society” with politics and social bonds that is in formation. If we begin with a non-“society” in the 1950s and 1960s—in the sense in a lack of coherence of its fundamental elements (which leads to a society fabricated by the force of a political might, narrow in its scope, and poor in integration)—what was the Baath attempting to do in all those years?

The middle class of peasants loyal to the state thesis applies well to the Jazira, which on its own comprises half of the cultivated areas, and which left its “feudal” landlords practically intact. Note here that there was not at any point a “maximum” that would operate at a national level: the “optimum” ownerships, based solely on size, were tied to all sorts of factors including region, climate, and irrigation. In some areas like Jazira cadastral records, instituted by the Mandate, fell behind, a condition that contributed at the slowness of reform.

In 1958, on the eve of the agrarian reforms, landless peasants formed the bulk of the peasantry by a 60 percent margin, which fell down to 36 percent amid the three agrarian reforms combined, but then the variations among regions and provinces vary considerably. In Raqqa and Dayr al-Zor only 18.5 and 14.5 percent of all lands have been respectively expropriated, leading to a class of large “feudal” landowners who knew how to appropriate their entrepreneurial skills even when they were hit by expropriation. It is at this stage that the power relations between landlords, tenants, workers, and peasants must be thoroughly studied. What is the nature of this relationship? Is it personal and based on custom? Or is it juridical, based on court action? Or is it customary based on kin violence and the like?

While both the 1958 and 1963 laws have contributed towards a more equitable distribution of property among classes, in spite of the fact that the so-called “feudal” class managed to maintain itself and its privileges, what has often been overlooked is the kind of contracts and obligations that such laws have managed to impose on landlords, tenants, and workers. First of all, and for the first time, contracts had to be written down, and automatically renewed. Moreover, they could be inherited, hence maintained from father to son. Contracts could be annulled or modified only through a judicial decision, hence requiring an explicit court order. Even though we are told that on average such laws have significantly improved the revenues and standard of living among peasants (again, with significant variations among regions and provinces), what social and economic historians fail to question is how such *written* contracts are structured, and how the writing itself has begun to shape matters differently, not only

because it *fixed* obligations, but for other matters as well, for instance, in the kind of discourse which manages the political with the juridical and economic.

The new law of 2004, which has been amended in 2011, is fairly complex. Composed as it is of 167 paragraphs, the law permits landlords to annul tenancy contracts within three years, with weak indemnities which are calculated based on the number of years for which labor has been invested on the land in question.

One of the major consequences of this law was the loss of tenant workers of lands that they have been working on with their families and households for years, while at the same time lifting prices way up, a thousand times in some areas, like the coastal area of Banyās on the Mediterranean which suddenly saw price hikes from 3,000 liras on the square-meter to 30,000.

Such major shifts coincided with the dismantlement of state farms in 2000, the year the second Asad assumed power. Between 2001 and 2007, 38,650 ha of land have been distributed to 12,500 beneficiaries in the Jazira alone. Those were either old landlords which had been expropriated in the past, or tenant farmers, or else state employees which were on the verge of retirement and receiving their pension plans. But the numbers alone do not provide the complete picture. In private interviews people complain that they have not been informed of the law in due time to be able to prepare and compete. Let us note here that for the 12,500 beneficiaries it was not a case of transfer of property pure and simple, as it only consolidates a right of use for 10 years, after which the beneficiary may fully acquire the property; hence it remains utterly forbidden to lease or sell those lands. Still, farmers, workers, and others critiqued the state for misinformation, for privileging the few over the majority (including state employees who had knowledge of the law firsthand), for corruption, and the usual bureaucratic slowness. Overall, the dismantlement of state farms has reinforced the “feudal” nature of the big landowners, which in spite of half a century of reforms, did nonetheless manage to regain ground.

We now come to the next chapter which raises the issue of the Kurdish dilemma from Raqqa to Ḥasakeh and Qāmishli, that is, all the Jazira areas which coexist on the Syrian–Turkish border, and for which the issue of “Arab sovereignty” comes to mind. This is particularly true for the Ḥasakeh area which saw since 1974 the formation of public farms as a tool for the purpose of creating an “Arab belt” (*ḥizām ‘arabī*) at the Turkish frontier in an area with a majority of Kurdish population.

It was indeed in 1952 that the first decree (193) regarding imposed restrictions of property ownership at the Turkish frontier was promulgated. In order to limit what was thought of as Kurdish irredentism in the Jazira, the political chief of police at the time, Muḥammad Ṭālib Hilāl, created a zone of 15 by 350 km in which all property transactions were made difficult. An authorization was needed from the ministry of agriculture which accorded rights to Arab

Syrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians (who fled the Iraqi pogroms in 1932, amid the coup of Bakr Sidqī), but not to Kurds. Moreover, a census in August 1962 which reorganizes the Kurdish population deprives 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian nationality, which had been unable to prove their presence in Syria prior to 1945. Those were issued a red identity card marking them as “foreigners,” *ajānib* (s. *ajnabī*), while their kids which were born and raised in Syria were classified as “hidden,” *maktūmīn* (s. *maktūm*), which it goes without saying were excluded from property rights.

Syrian authorities had always made the claim that amid the 1958 land reforms, Kurdish tribes resettled in Syria, coming from Turkey. After the riots of April 2004 which began in a football match ceremony in Qāmishlī, then spread within one week to Ḥasakeh and Aleppo’s predominantly northern Kurdish neighborhoods, president Asad promised 90,000 Kurds to receive full citizenship. The Kurds for their part claim the citizenship for a 150,000 *ajānib* and 75,000 *maktūmīn*. The latest promise from the Syrian presidency came on April 2011, amid the riots in Dar’a, whereby 100,000 Kurds were accorded the presidency out of 225,000 demanded by the Kurdish parties and human rights organizations affiliated to them.

III. Beyond landholding and the “socialism” of the Baath: frontiers of the new “liberal” economy

As we have seen in the previous section, Syria went through three stages of landholding types:

1. In Ottoman times the land holders were prebendal tax assignees, hence their “ownership” were *de facto* rather than *de jure*; as they lived for the most part in cities, they were hence nominal absentee holders, outsourcing the services of tax, rent, surtax, fee collections to the rural aghāwāt and others.
2. The same families under the Mandate transformed their *de facto* into *de jure* ownership, hence they finally owned as *milk* what they had been “assigned” in Ottoman times.
3. The agrarian reforms in 1958, 1963, 1966, and later led to a loss of the huge “feudal” properties of the big families, but only to a certain extent, with large variations across regions and provinces. The Jazira for instance maintained the format of large properties, becoming the major source of grain production for the rest of Syria. Overall, the agrarian reforms, whilst creating a peasantry with land ownership, with small to medium-sized properties, created side effects, which were never properly addressed. For one thing, many of the properties were too small to serve as a basis for living for the bulk of rural families; which pushed for the *hijra* to the cities, creating belts of poverty and shanty town, between legal and illegal zones.
4. With the dissolution of state farms in 2000, and the law of “agrarian relations” in 2004, and the drought in 2007–2011 to the present, nearly 330,000 agrarian workers lost their jobs. The capitalist “liberalization” of agrarian relations was the most significant event prior to the civil war.

The Damascus rural population numbers in the latest statistics 2,743,998 individuals, or 13.3 percent of the total population, with 37,933 sporadic illegal wells in 2005, 32.6 percent of Syria as a whole. Each well is a story of power relations, and crony entrepreneurship. The area of *Rif Dimashq* received in 1990–2005, since the Law of Investment in 1991, 70 percent of all legalized industrial projects in the country. Which led to a huge shrinking of cultivable areas (only 11.6 percent of the Rif are eligible), hence an overall decline in agriculture, due to industrialization and urbanization (part of which is sporadic), inflation and unemployment, the end of subsidies on oil products, beginning with diesel—and small properties. With the 2007–2011 drought and the global recession in 2008–09, there were closures of industrial projects, which led to excessive layoffs, amid the tide of “liberalization” that had swept agriculture and the economy at large.⁴

The expropriation of properties from small landowners was another problem. In Kafarsusah the state expropriated dozens of properties, whose market value was among the highest in the Damascus area (city and countryside), for the sake of the ministry of foreign affairs, and whose owners had been indemnified in properties located in Ḥusayniyyah or ‘Adra (where expropriations were made for the sake of the industrial zone) in the Damascus countryside. Those were the people who were insurgents from day one. The expropriated properties were either set for the common good, or else for the new businessmen with holding companies (*sharikāt qābiḍa*).

There was therefore a breakdown in the Damascus countryside since the 1990s. First of all, this was the region that profited the most from Investment Law 1991. In 2005–07, it received the highest amount of invested capitals in the country, SP15,929,000,000 (close to 16 billion), seconded by Aleppo, 11,529,000,000, which led to the lowest period of unemployment in both areas. In parallel to that, and in the same prosperous period, the sporadic buildings may have amounted to as much as 37 percent.

We need to distinguish between two types of “small bourgeoisie.” One that is traditional, which is, so to speak, neo-Ottoman, and which is based on small shopkeepers, manufacturing, and small to medium rural properties; and another one which is the outcome of new industries and medium entrepreneurship, with connections to telecommunications, technology and law.⁵

The “new small bourgeoisie,” whose sons and daughters had benefited from their college degrees, telecommunications, and a know-how that mattered, was hit hard by the excessive “liberalization” and the crisis of 2008–09. Which led to all kinds of closures in small industries, in particular in furniture, clothing, and food, due to competition coming from Asia, China,

⁴ Muhammad Jamal Bārūt, *al-‘Aqd al-akhīr fi tārikh Sūriyya. Jadaliyyat al-jumūd wa-l-iṣlāh*, Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012, 311–313.

⁵ Bārūt, 318–320.

Malaysia, and neighboring Turkey. Whenever a manufacturing family was hit hard, it was also their workers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and teachers that were affected. (The Idlib countryside is among the poorest.) The breakdown of industries and the new small bourgeoisie in the Damascus countryside “connected” a disconnected (disjoined) “rebellious” territory, from Damascus to Jabal al-Zāwiyah and Idlib.

“Revolution” from the “outside”

There are various ways of “revolutionizing” a city or location, either from the “outside,” usually the surrounding countryside, or from the “inside.” In August 2011 young hooded men came from Jabal al-Zāwiyah to Ariḥa and Jisr al-Shughūr to “dominate” the town. When the people of Ariḥa resisted such attempts, those of the Jabal boycotted them. Ariḥa finally gave up letting people from the countryside demonstrate, which led to burning, on more than one occasion, the Baath Party office, destroying a statute of Hafiz Asad, the liberation of prisoners, and stealing arms from the police station.

Aleppo is another case of a “revolution” from the “outside.” The city was fairly quiet in 2011, as it had been in the great revolt of 1925, with minor demonstrations and skirmishes. But in July 2012 it was taken by 3,000 militiamen from outside the city, probably from the Aleppo and Idlib countryside, in an operation where the Free Syrian Army and other “Islamist” militias joined ranks. What followed was a division of the city in two-halves and the massive destruction of the historic city center and its “opposition” neighborhoods. In what follows, we’ll reconsider whether such division, between an inside and outside, countryside and city, makes sense historically and economically.

In the 1970s growth at a 10.5 percent average rate (without development) principally came from the large patrimonial bureaucracy which kept expanding at an accelerating rate. In the absence of associationism and civil society, the civil and military bureaucracies (which include Party and intelligence services) were creating a “society” at their own image. With the Asad clan solely in power, even the other Alawi clans had been marginalized, some of which were historically stronger and more influential. The Asad-clan patrimonialization of the bureaucracy created a “state bourgeoisie” based on clientelistic networks through the massive projects that the state had ushered. The capital accumulation of this bureaucracy of service led to massive corruption, leaving little hope among the populace that Asad’s “corrective movement” had any hope. If anything, the “movement” had created a rentier state where the *status* of the state’s “clients” is all what mattered to collect the rent of their “investments.” In such instances, when it came to the investments of the 1970s, it was not the “profitability” of an investment that mattered (say, a state textile factory), but the *position* of all those who “profited” from those investments in their relation to the state. Using a Khaldunian language, such a rentier state-subservient bourgeoisie constituted a “kingdom,” *imāra*, as an entry point to conduct its “businesses,” which were “profitable” only thanks to massive state corruption.

As a group, such “businessmen” were neither entrepreneurs nor a *bourgeoisie d'affaires* properly speaking, but a state bourgeoisie.⁶

In the 1980s the era of the prime minister Abdul Ra’ūf al-Kasm, 1980–1987, the clientelistic bourgeoisie felt hampered by the laws and regulations that various governments had decreed. The plutocrats had invested so many of their cohorts (kin members, in-laws, restricted family members, sons, daughters, cousins, and clients) in the bureaucracy that they kept pressuring president Asad not to be fettered in any way by Kasm’s various governments. In order to be worthy of their investments, they had to be set free. Which is what Asad finally did by appointing Maḥmūd al-Zughbī as prime minister in 1987, who survived in that position until 1999, an indication at how much the kleptocracy on the top had tightened itself at controlling all entries and new comers to the system.

In the shadow of plutocrats and kleptocrats

The ideological retreat of the Baathist socialist modernist state represents the central enabler of a curious mix of plutocrats and kleptocrats. In the 1990s, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc, and the failure of Asad’s “rectification movement” to deliver the goods and services that it had promised for two decades, the state looked forward to “private entrepreneurship” to thrive, without, however, affecting the underpinnings of the ‘aṣabiyya-rentier state, with the Asad clan sitting on its top. It was that kind of atmosphere that pushed the enactment of Investment Law 10 in 1991, which led to the likes of Muhammad Kallas’ “entrepreneurship” to thrive *locally*. As kinship thrives in the smallest matters, and a fortiori in investment, the nearly 60,000 of Kallas’ clients and “investors,” some of whom had lost all their savings by 1994, were mostly local Aleppo residents, with kin bonds between Beirut and Damascus and elsewhere. A plutocrat of the type of Kallas was able to thrive precisely because the wealth accumulated by some of Aleppo’s middle class had no place to go, except perhaps in the banks of neighboring countries. Kallas, a resident of the city at the time, (falsely) presented himself as an all-to-go entrepreneur whose financial operations were carefully backed by the labor of his (mostly textile) manufacturing plants. As the whole operation was based on *trust*, and word-to-mouth relations, Kallas could not operate anymore when in 1994 rumors were spreading that Aleppo’s “big man” did not have enough collaterals to cover the “investments” that people had trusted him for. Consequently, his properties had to be forfeited to “cover” for the mounting “debt.”

The phenomenon of Kallas, and later, the Dayri Brothers, came in conjunction with a brand of kleptocrats who were high-level state employees using the institutions of state in schemes of embezzlement. Even though, in practice, the two groups may overlap or co-mingle, the likes of Kallas differ from kleptocrats in that they wanted to neutralize the state institutions in order to facilitate private-sector looting. Kallas was benefiting from the lack of investment

⁶ Bārūt, 34.

opportunities for the middle class at large, in particular regarding banks and financial institutions, to accumulate as much wealth as possible at a rapid pace. When the state had to take action in the face of the debacle in 1994, it ironically narrowed social relations to their basic kin underpinning: Law 8 in 1994 was passed, which rendered it illegal to accept money from “strangers” not from one’s family as “investments.” Kallas by contrast benefited precisely from the “trust of kin,” by *enlarging* “kin” so as to include non-family members.

The programs that contributed to the hollowing out of the state and which pushed the likes of Kallas to the forefront in the 1990s simultaneously led to state-employed kleptocrats to work out “investment” schemes that would have been impossible without the status that such employees enjoyed in the state’s upper bureaucracy. The ideological and economic retreat of the Baathist state in the 1980s and 1990s (in its role as the “big savior”) happened at a time when from Latin America to Africa to the former Eastern Bloc states had witnessed structural adjustment and shock therapy programs that ultimately led to their hollowing out. The physical buildings and institutions of “adjusted” states may have remained in place, but their ambitions and capacities shriveled. The states in these countries dramatically decreased spending on social services—ranging from subsidies for food and fuel to broader social services like public health and pensions. State-owned industries were either shut down or privatized, with wages and employment slashed. The state, in other words, further shed its capacity to deliver a decent life to its citizens, leading to a collapse in the popular expectation that it should serve as guarantor of progress.

Even though in Syria such collapse was already palpable, prompting the rapid promulgation of Investment Law 10 in 1991, the process accelerated with Bashshār Asad succeeding his father in 2000. Much has been said about the ascendancy of ‘aşabiyya-driven kleptocrats like Rami Makhlūf, the president’s maternal cousin, who controls telecommunications and other media outlets, but the real transformation took place in 2000 with the sudden closure of “state farms,” and the promulgation of a new law on “agrarian relations” in 2004. Even though the dismantlement of state farms did not imply a “return” to private property, the re-“feudalization” of agrarian relations took place *de facto* if not *de jure* with the “rights” that the “old” and new proprietors were accorded for at least a decade, after which they would legally own the property in question. What we see here is a reliance on the “forces on the ground” to come at the rescue of institutions that had been financially losing for decades. Such drive to “privatize” the economy notwithstanding, the Syrian state managed to keep up its old industrial and financial institutions almost intact. Thus, all the moribund state industries, some of which a product of the expropriations of the 1960s, have not been privatized; nor has the prominent place occupied by the Commercial Bank of Syria been displaced by the few private banks that opened their doors to the public in 2004–05. As “privatization” has not taken the Chinese road of dismantling institutions that have no future on the regional and international markets, the state has *de facto* encouraged all “private entrepreneurship” which could have been “fair” or not, some of which was local and some was international. For example, the head of the Ismā‘ili sect worldwide, Agha Khan, is a known global investor who

in 2006–07 began pouring millions of dollars in hotels and touristic projects in the city of Aleppo, some of which touched on key infrastructural areas, such as the citadel area in the city's historical center. Even though the Agha Khan is not particularly known for “illicit” deals, he nevertheless looks suspicious having been authorized lucrative projects in a city like Aleppo.

As the Syrian economy hesitatingly opened its markets to cross-border financial and trade flows, the combination of moribund state institutions and private entrepreneurship, whether perfectly legal or kleptocratic in its essence, created both the opportunity for enterprising individuals to make money in new ways and, for many, an imperative to do so as a matter of survival. Herein lies one of the “motifs” of the current civil war. Initially, with the peaceful demonstrations in 2011, the idea was no more than “opening up” the moribund *dirigiste* state to the new economic realities which it partly had contributed at unleashing. It was as if all what the country needed was a new presidency that would “admit” once and for all the end of the Baathist state, so that entrepreneurial energy is unleashed without shame or second thoughts.

Holding companies

The situation would change in 2000 with the holding companies, *sharikāt qābiḍa*. There is a history to such companies which probably begins with Lutfi al-Ḥaffār, 1885–1968, who was at the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, had initiated the phenomenon of the joint-stock companies as early as 1909.

Joint-stock and anonymous companies steadily grew under the Mandate in the 1930s up to the 1960s, with manufacturing, industrial, commercial, and agricultural companies. The high point was the 1950s and the Union, when many families diverted their assets to anonymous joint-stock companies in *ṣināʿāt taḥwīliyya*, “shifting industries,” reaching 10,000 contributors.⁷

As to holding companies, the Kumāsiyyah (al-Sharikah al-tijāriyyah al-ṣināʿiyyah al-muttaḥidah al-mughfalah) was undeniably the first one to be in that category: it bought shares of other companies, controlling them partially or in toto. The company became known to have influenced internal politics since the times of Adib Shishakli, declining under the Union and the first wave of nationalizations. In Aleppo a conglomeration of entrepreneurs, known as “the five pilgrims” saw light during that same period when the Kumāsiyyah was reigning from Damascus.

It was precisely that kind of entrepreneurship that was absent in the period 1963–1987, with all kinds of “rectification” attempts that spawned over decades. In the 1990s the phenomenon of

⁷ Bārūt 66.

“capital collectors,” *jāmi‘i amwāl*, came into being, with Muhammad Kallas as the prominent guide in Aleppo, leading to his bankruptcy in 1994–95.

By 2006–2007 entrepreneurship became organized into legalized holding companies, with Rami Makhlūf, the president’s maternal cousin, presiding over the Investment Fund of the Orient, and the country’s first and dominant cellular company, Syriatel. (The competition was kept between two companies, without a third for price arbitration.) Overall, Makhlūf, thanks to his familial presidential links, was able to attract the capital of close to 100 “entrepreneurs,” mostly Syrians, but with Arab elements, whose “investments” were organized into holding companies. Two things characterize the “group of the big 100.” First of all, their relation to the state. As they acted as a “group” led by Makhlūf, and through the work of their holding companies, they did not negotiate their “contracts” on a one-by-one basis, which meant avoiding, at least to some extent, “individualized corruption.” The state had to address the group’s situation collectively in terms of taxes, surtaxes, and other fees; but above all, it became a *group of patrimonial rentiers* which benefited from their special protected status vis-à-vis the apparatuses of the state. What they were effectively delivering to the state in terms of “income” was precisely a byproduct of their “rentier status.” Second of all, and unlike the previous generation of entrepreneurs from the 1950s and 1960s and later, whose capital was deposited in joint-stock companies, and which invested in agriculture, food, and textile, the new (Makhlūf) generation avoided such industrial projects, probably because they were not lucrative enough, and demanding complex relations with the labor workforce, which probably they could not handle with Syria’s convoluted labor laws. What they did, on the whole successfully, was to invest in “clean” infrastructural technologies, beginning with telecommunications, cellular networks, fiber optics, and the Internet. Hence the deprioritized agriculture was embattled on two grounds: first, the withdrawal of the state from its public farms since 2000, and the enactment of the 2004 “neoliberal” law on “agrarian relations,” and, second, the total absence of the “100” in agriculture.

The “success” of the “top 100” led in the context of the Sham Holding Company, which was a consortium of local Syrian businessmen, with immigrants in the Gulf, and Gulf capital, to accumulate \$350 million as starting capital to underwrite the initial offerings, much higher than the \$200 million initial expectation. But, as usual, nothing was perfectly harmonious: there were disputes that were leaked to the media or were litigated in court.

The competition, if any, ultimately led to two big conglomerations of capital. The first one, the Sham Holding Company, was inaugurated by Rami Makhlūf with Muhammad Kamel (Ṣabbāgh) Sharābātī as partner, the well known industrialist from Aleppo, both of whom had the largest share, while the company was presided by Muhammad Nabil Kuzbarī, an expatriate living in Austria. The company, although dominated by Makhlūf and his partner Sharābātī, had 71 businessmen with an estimated capital of \$1.350 billion. Makhlūf’s wealth was initially limited to family business, but he managed to expand it by first creating the Free Markets Company (which sold free-tax goods at border checkpoints, airports, and elsewhere),

and then Syriatel with the Egyptian businessmen Nagib Soyros, a partnership that quickly collapsed in the early days of Syriatel and went to court. Makhlūf managed to initiate other family members from his Alawi clan into business, while opening up to other opportunities. His Aleppo partner, who became known as Abu Kamel Sharābātī, belonged to a textile family with a well known tradition in the business, which expanded in the 1980s, when the state realized that it had to “encourage” private investments, letting entrepreneurs do what they were successfully doing in the 1950s and 1960s, prior to the nationalizations initiated by the Union and the Baath. Sharābātī began work with his paternal in-law (his wife’s father) with whom he later departed to form his own company.

The second company was the Syrian Holding Company, founded by 23 shareholders, for the most part businessmen, whose capital was estimated at 4 billion liras. The two companies thus had the “top 100” in industry, trade, and utilities, some of whom were board members in companies and chambers of commerce in Damascus, Aleppo, Tartus, and Latakia, an indication that the traditional Sunni Damascus–Aleppo axis had lost Hims and Hama in favor of the “Alawite” coast represented by its two major cities of Tartus and Latakia, the former became dubbed during the current civil war as “the city of martyrs.” The Sham Holding accounted on its own for 60 percent of Syria’s economic activity, with an estimated \$1 billion in capital.

With the coming of the second Asad to power in 2000, the idea was not so much to “privatize” the poorly performing state enterprises (The Chinese way), which were the majority of the industries, utilities, and services, but to “liberalize” the economy through private entrepreneurships without, however, touching on the public sector, a combination that did not go well. Thus when it came to the Sham Holding and Syria Holding companies, the state treated them as “full partners,” giving them the facilities that they needed, but it did so while giving up on various development projects, beginning with agriculture, a sector that holding companies did not even bother with in their various investments. There was thus a tripartite investment scheme, between the holding companies, the state, and foreign investors, which played well in some sectors, and for a certain “educated” middle class, but which left the bulk of the country, its small towns and countryside, remote provinces, out of the loop, without any real development plan that would account for regional differences. The state’s philosophy, assuming it had one, was to favor rapid profit investments, of which the telecommunication sector, beginning with cellular networks, was the most prominent and lucrative business (tourism, real estate, transportation, banking and finance, energy and health care, and more generally utilities and services for the middle class). Here the state realized that private investments de facto placed it in a lucrative “partnership,” providing it with millions of dollars for “concessions” it gave to Syriatel and others. The pattern was not simply different of the self-proclaimed “socialism” of the Baath, but of the investments of the 1950s and 1960s which focused on core industries, *ṣināʿāt taḥwīliyya*, and projects like the Latakia port. Thus, not only the holding companies did not invest in agriculture, but they encouraged the imports of agricultural and food-related products from abroad, leading to a further destabilization and

impoverishment of the sector. Moreover, although the new companies benefited from the state's energy programs in basic utilities such as water, electricity, oil and gas, there was no deep investment from their part in such crucial sectors. In sum, it all looks as if Investment Law 10 of 1991, whose aim was to encourage exports, worked well a decade after its promulgation. The first generation of "capital collectors" was too "unprofessional" to survive for long. The second generation realized that the method of holding companies was the best for their purposes, as it avoided the "middle class" in favor of the "big 100," while simultaneously creating a capitalist dynamic of diverse investments. More importantly, it had the state as an "informal partner," providing for the needed resources (real estate and energy) for the lucrative "taxes" that it collected, in particular from the new telecoms. In sum, the "big 100" achieved an unparalleled "rent status" establishing them as a quasi-monopoly at the national level. They would only compete regionally with investors from the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabi (e.g. Prince Al-Walid b. Sultan who inaugurated his business with the Four Seasons in Damascus, as his entry-point to the Syrian investment system, with others from the Saudi royal family, or linked to it). For the Syrian state the monopoly-protected entrepreneurship of the "big 100" came in tandem with its oil revenues from the fields in the Dayr al-Zor countryside.⁸

The trickledown effect: patterns of uprising

Was there a trickledown effect from all those industries and services? Did the lower classes benefit? Did the middle classes benefit?

The rise of unemployment was worrisome in agriculture. Although officially unemployment grew in 2004–08 at 16 percent, and went up with the 2008–09 world financial crisis, it was, indeed, in agriculture that the losses were the steepest, with 330,000 jobs lost in 2004–08, from a high of 1.4 million down to 800,000 in 2002–08, a drop of 44 percent nationwide, and 50 percent in Ḥasakeh, 67 percent in Swaydā, 60 percent in Damascus, 59 percent in Idlib, 54 percent in Aleppo, and 28 percent in the Latakia province; hitting women more than men, 68 and 30 percent respectively.⁹

It is usually accepted that the initial event that triggered the violence was the arrest of dozen of schoolchildren which were protesting against the régime, repeating gestures and words that became all too familiar amid the "Arab Spring," in the southern city of Dar'a on March 18, 2011, which in turn led to the storming a week later by the army of the city's main 'Umarī mosque where some of the inhabitants had taken refuge in protest to some of the women and their children had received a rough treatment at the hand of the intelligence units. Which created overt divisions at the top of the leadership, between an "Egyptian" style of negotiation, whereby the army would not fire at its own people, and one that was frankly brutal, leaving

⁸ Bārūt 71–73.

⁹ Bārūt 108.

practically no room for negotiation. It also fostered “old” divisions among the ulama, one headed by the mufti Shaykh Ahmad Hassun, who was in favor of “settling” with the authorities, and others who were opposed storming mosques and shooting at protesters, or arresting schoolchildren and women. Because the state’s history with “Islamist” parties, organizations, movements, preachers and intellectuals is fairly negative, with the bloody episode of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1979–1982 as the epitome of violence which closed the Brotherhood chapter as a “legal” party once and for all, there were, amid the ‘Umarī episode, many voices that dissented. With the growing dissention among ulama and Islamist organizers, the régime reached the point that it would be in its favor that such dissenters “took over,” with the hope that the “uprising” would be portrayed for the public opinion out there as “extremist.” Thus, the state media adopted a style since the early weeks of the uprising of describing the protests as “terrorist.” Moreover, it has since then become common knowledge that the régime took seriously its own representation of the protests, which by the summer 2011 had already become nationwide and daily, as driven by “Islamic extremism.” It thus released in winter 2011 a couple hundred “extremists” from the Ṣadnāyā prison, among them Muhammad al-Jūlānī, who became the head of the Nuṣra Front, which he founded with other released “colleagues” from the same prison.

To wit, Dar‘a’s uprising was just *one* form of protest. It was the kind of protest that was essentially *ahlī*, as it came with strong local family, kin, and clan bonds. The “crowds” of protesters, mostly young and middle-aged men, targeted *symbols of state*: the Baath party, police stations, intelligence services, and statutes and pictures. It thus remained regionally located, and more importantly, the city itself neither acted “on behalf” of the countryside, nor was “pushed” by the latter for statist demands. It is as if the Dar‘a itself *was* its countryside, and the latter *was* the city. The people, the ones in the city and countryside, wanted a régime change, no more no less, with a least the top of the pyramid—the presidency—moving hands in another direction. It is as if the protests had unleashed all kinds of hidden fears up in the public eye, where the “crowds” would celebrate their “coming together” against the symbols and symbolisms of the Baathist régime.

To understand that kind of “symbiosis” between city and countryside one must first realize that the clans of Dar‘a have become *ḥaḍar*, that is, they have become civilized decades ago. Then in the 1960s, a strong sense of urbanization came into a predominantly rural area, where to civilize meant adopting patterns of behavior coming from a “national” pan-Arab perspective with strong local colorings. Which was enough to bring a common pattern of protesting between Dar‘a and smaller towns.

The protests soon moved north to Ḥimṣ and east to Dayr al-Zor. What is interesting in the latter is the “tribal factor,” as tribes of the caliber of the Baqqārah and ‘Uqaydāt played a role in the Damascus Announcement, whereby some of the chiefs of those tribes joined ranks with protesters and intellectuals in Damascus, signing a general petition of protest. Among the most active are the Bashīr clan of the Baqqārah, and the Dandal of the ‘Uqaydāt; the former

are part of the larger “thigh” of the Bū ‘Arab, which in turn is associated with other thighs, such as the ‘Ābed, which historically have been inheriting the leadership of the Baqqārah. Their tribal shaykhs have been active in parliamentary life since the Mandate, and fought against the Law of the Tribes which was proposed by the Arab Socialist Party in the late 1940s, when it was presided by Akram Hourani. As the east has been dominated by the Islamic State (Isis) since 2012–13, the tribes made lucrative oil deals with their new masters, giving another twist to the ongoing civil war. What this shows, at least for now, is a level of “adaptability” of tribes to new situations, from the Asad régime, to the street protests in Dayr al-Zor (a city of a quarter-million inhabitants), to the “revolutionary” militias (Free Syrian Army, Nusra Front, etc.), up to Isis. The question is, with that kind of “adaptability,” what kind of structural change is the civil war implanting on tribes? As the tribal system, contrary to all expectations, is “avoid fighting at all cost,” what is the “cost” of making “economic alliances” with “hostile” forces? (We’ll come back to that in the section on Isis below.)

Unlike Damascus, but more so like Aleppo, some of the peripheral neighborhoods of Hims are composed of people from Bedouin or tribal origin, which for the most part are pastoral. But unlike Aleppo, or Damascus for that matter, Hims has been plagued by sectarian conflicts, primarily between Sunni and Alawi peripheral neighborhoods, which are a product of mountain and rural migration of the last decades. Hence the divisions in Hims are primarily peripheral, where the pastoral tribal element comes in conjunction with sectarian rifts among Sunnis and Alawis. Which led by 2012 to the militarization of the conflict in the city’s suburbs, in particular Khaldiyya and Babu ‘Umaru, and a massive destruction in neighborhoods up to the city’s historic center, and its sudden end in May 2014 when a deal was struck for the rebels (FSA, Nusra, etc.) to withdraw peacefully with their families and weapons to undisclosed locations.¹⁰

The pastoral tribes, whose power extends from the north-eastern peripheries of Hims to Tall Kalakh at the Lebanese border, though they benefited from the agrarian reforms, could not survive anymore from agriculture alone, hence they turned to contraband, in particular the lucrative and much needed market of diesel oil, thanks to the fluctuating prices between Syria and Lebanon. Because diesel oil is heavily subsidized in Syria, as it is a more needed commodity than it is in Lebanon, the Syrian state cannot tolerate its contraband towards neighboring countries. In 2010 the state took action by arresting some of the influential tribal elders, in addition to others living in Hims’ peripheral zones, which were mostly tribal, hence suddenly cutting their main source of living. Hims got affected since 2010, the year prior to the protests, in four peripheral areas, among which were Dayr Ba‘labah and Baba ‘Umaru, and peripherally situated from the north-east of the city, to the east and south-east, while marginally expanding into the inner neighborhoods of Shammās, Karm al-Zaytūn, Sabil, and Muhājirīn.

¹⁰ Bārūt 234ff.

Initially it all began on March 18, 2011, “the Friday of Dignity,” in the vicinity of the mosque of Khalid b. al-Walid, in the *bādiya*-like neighborhood of Khaldiyya, whose name became synonymous with sectarianism and some of the fiercest battles fought in the civil war, spreading to Baba ‘Umaru, a peripheral neighborhoods with a majority of Bedouin residents from the ‘Uqaydāt tribe and its al-Mushāhid clan who had been deeply affected by the clamp down on smuggling through the Lebanese border near Tall Kalakh.

On April 18, 2011, the security forces delivered the body of Shaykh Badr Abu Musa to his relatives. A leading member of the Fawā‘ira clan in Hims, he was arrested a week earlier, and his death caused trouble in the “tribal” neighborhoods, where the young organized massive protests. As to the traditional clan leadership, represented by Shaykh Fad‘ūs, a member of parliament and a “friend” to the government, it found itself unable to control the mass of protest, in particular among the youth. However, the “opponents” of the government—those of the Damascus Announcement—among the tribal clans in the country at large took the whole incident seriously, promoting the first Friday of May 2011 as the “Friday of the Tribes,” hoping that tribes and clans would massively join in at the “national” level. However, those who participated were already young people in action since the early days of the riots, were young men from the Baqqārah of Dayr al-Zor, under the leadership of Shaykh Faysal al-Bashīr, in addition to the ‘Uqaydāt in the Bū Kamāl, in particular the Dandal family which controls the ‘Uqaydāt’s leadership, and headed by the young Shaykh Amir Mushref Dandal. The ‘Uqaydāt’s participation in Hims came through their strong faction of al-Mushāhadāh, whose members live in Baba ‘Umaru. The style of the protests was, as in Dar‘a, overall “peaceful,” in the sense that the protesters did not carry arms, had no weapons at all, but limited to a desecration of the symbols of the state, as we’ve seen it before already, and the closing of the Damascus–Aleppo highway more than once at Rastan in the Hims countryside. But by July 2011 things started to get rough, if not ugly, when four young Alawi men were kidnapped (abducted) and their mutilated bodies were found few days later thrown in a street. According to *al-Waṭan*, Damascus, the four were apparently university students active in politics who named their group the “lovers of Syria,” and were preparing for a big petition that involved the signing of thousands of contributors on a Syrian flag (report on July 17, 2011). By the end of the year, not only the city was already into sectarian divisions, neighborhood by neighborhood, but the violence was already a full fledged *ahli* civil war. Let’s note briefly here that Hama neither had the “tribal” problem nor the “confessional” one, hence the city managed to maintain a sense of “integrity,” still healing from the massive destruction that it suffered in 1982 at the hands of the special forces.¹¹

¹¹ Bārūt 237ff.

IV. Patrimonial caliphs and revolutionary micro-managers

The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham¹² began as the Iraqi affiliate of al-Qaida during the American occupation of the country (2003–2011), then managed to expand in the Syrian north and east since 2012. It split off with the other “Islamist” (predominantly Syrian) groups, in particular its chief rival the Nusra Front, when Isis leader, operating under the nom de guerre of Abu Bakr Baghdadi, demanded in summer 2013 the bay‘a from Nusra’s chief Abu Muhammad Jūlānī, another one of those war-machines pseudonyms. Had Jūlānī given his bay‘a (“endorsement”) it would have meant the end the Nusra as an autonomous military unit; but having refused “endorsing” his rival, Isis marginalized itself, in one of its rare military setbacks, in the Aleppo region. There was a time until the end of 2013 when Isis controlled even some of the northern predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo (e.g. Bustān al-Bāshā), and the crucial “gateway” (*mamarr*) of Bustān al-Qaṣr, but ultimately withdrew when facing mounting pressures. Press reports claim that Isis has become a “wealthy revolution,” with tons of cash at its disposal, operating with a monthly budget of \$50 million, and paying its militiamen, which happen to be from very diverse nationalities (including Europeans), a hefty \$400 a month, which is at least twice what the others are paying. Here the “other” could mean anything from the Nusra Front, the main rival, or other Islamist groups, or the Free Syrian Army (FSA) for that matter. But while the latter, in all their conflicting configurations, religious or secular, are mostly Syrian, in the sense that were born and raised on Syrian territory, with a wide majority of Syrians into them, Isis by contrast saw its inception in Iraq during the American occupation, and Baghdadi himself was in jail until probably 2009; or, by certain accounts, he could have been released as early as 2004.¹³ Its “Syrian” component is barely half of its military force. When Baghdadi declared the caliphate in the first day of Ramadan in early July 2014, he appointed himself as caliph Ibrahim, gave a public sermon in a prestigious Mosul mosque in a defiant gesture to the world-at-large, which marked his first public appearance ever (previous unconfirmed photographs of him during his captivity years were circulated by Iraqi intelligence; the Americans have set a \$10-million reward over his head). A week later, as the head of the new “Islamic State,” which is now a “territorial reality,” in addition to being an act of the “imagination,” Baghdadi appointed “governors” (*wulāt*; *s. wālī*) over the newly gained *ghanīmas* (“booty”) of the central “Iraqi provinces.” What is striking here is that he proceeded with appointments that were not “local,” that is to say, were

¹² Both the terms of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, are inappropriate, as both the Levant and Syria denote meanings that are incongruent with what Sham implies for the purported *dawla islāmiyya*: the Levant would look like a colonial reality in line with Sykes-Picot, which means “artificial” borders created from the “outside,” through colonial administrators in Paris, London, and elsewhere; while Syria gives the impression of a postcolonial “national” state. Al-Sham by contrast should be understood in its “prophetic” meaning: that of a religious territory which is not fragmented along clearly demarcated borderlines, and which comes “next” to the holy Hījāz area. Isis is known as “Dā‘ish” in Arabic, for the acronym of al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi-l-‘Irāq wa-l-Shām, but if an unfortunate would utter such a word in public in an Isis-controlled area, he could be punished with 80 whips.

¹³ *The New York Times*, September 1st, 2014.

not “Iraqi,” as if the new “caliphate” has a de facto pan-Arab if not “universal” pan-Islamic mission. For example, the Libyan Abu Usama al-Miṣrāṭa (from Miṣrāṭa, Qadhafi’s hometown and tribal area) was appointed as “governor” (wālī) to the Iraqi nāḥiya of Sa’diyya in the province of Diyāla. But he was ambushed and killed four days later when his convoy was hit by a side bomb in Sa’diyya, which has been under Isis’s rule for a month. The incident has probably to do with the refusal of the other Sunni militias, which have benefited from Isis’s expansion in June from giving their bay’a to the self-appointed caliph. Among those groups are “the Naqshabandi group” of ‘Izzat al-Dūrī, who was Saddam’s ex-vice president, and which the Americans had failed to capture; in addition the Army of Anṣār al-Sunna; and the Islamic Army (al-Hayat, Beirut, 10 July 2014). (It was known that the Ottomans appointed administrators and governors in provinces that were not those of their origins, shifting them every few years, in an attempt not to have those governors intermingle more than they should with the local populace.)

What is important here, in the newly established caliphate whose territory stretches over northern Syria and central Iraq, is how a group like Isis, not to mention the other groups which are not to be reduced to their “Islamist” components, “govern” the populations, neighborhoods, towns, villages, tribal areas, which they seem to have “seized” “with ease.” The seizure of entire territories in central “Sunni” Iraq on June 10th comes to mind first in this respect: is such seizure an outcome of military prowess, the tactics of “guerilla” war which faces a much more equipped and organized army than its own (be it Iraqi, Syrian, or American), or has it more to do with a populace which initially suffers from poor systems of representations, has been ruled by “external” forces, including the “national state,” hence is not even a “society” in the first place. Isis controls now one-third of the Syrian territory, on a par with “the state” itself, with continuous (contiguous) domains stretching from the Hims bādiya, up to al-Hawl on the Syrian–Iraqi border, east-south of Ḥasakeh, and the town of al-Rāṣī on the Syrian–Turkish border, and the village of Shāmer on the northern-eastern entrance of the city of Aleppo, which gives them roughly 35 percent of contiguous territory (al-Hayat, 19 July 2014).

To elaborate, what needs to be questioned is the ability of small militarized groups (experts assume that Isis controls parts of Syria and Iraq with no more than 10,000 to 15,000 well-trained but modestly armed men) to “govern” and “subdue” populations and territories (including tribal areas) which could be even “alien” to them, and with a minimal force which would be no more than 2 to 5 percent of the populations of the conquered territories. This is, in our view, the fundamental aspect of the Syrian wars, which have become since June joined Iraqi–Syrian wars led by militias whose organization is not much in sync with the populations.

Large portions of Syria and Iraq are now controlled by heterogeneous military groups, which in sheer number and equipment seem far below what the Syrian and Iraqi “national” armies have now or had for decades. Such groups come in sorts: some claim to be liberal democratic, like the Free Syrian Army, while the majority are jihadist, with Isis pioneering in this regard.

For the most part, however, they do not seem to have anything that even comes close to a political or social “program” to “govern” the territories, tribes, villages, towns, cities and neighborhoods under their control. Their tactics are rather one of pure survival. First of all, in the conquest, withdrawal, and re-conquest, they would never adopt a style of frontal attacks, as regular armies would normally do. (T.E. Lawrence’s art of guerilla tactics against the Turkish soldiers and garrisons in the Hijaz come to mind here as a source of inspiration for understanding such methods; but also the “failures” of the Americans in Vietnam and later in Iraq to “subdue” or “kill” guerilla groups, from the Vietcong to the jihadists.) Second of all, once an area is conquered, they may or may not adopt a harsh style (arrest and torture of “opponents”), but even if they do they tend to be “friendly” with the population at large, not requesting much, as the sources of income tend often, though not always, to originate “from elsewhere.” That’s an important point: controlling a territory which would not de facto generate much income to the conquering group, at least not in the early phase. Thus, some of the resources used in Syria, say, in the northern-central areas of Minbij and Raqqa may come from other regions, for instance, the oil-wealthy region of Dayr al-Zor, or, indeed, from neighboring Iraq (the take over of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, was particularly lucrative, bringing close to \$500 million in a single day from the city’s banks).

Thirdly, we need to compare and contrast modes of “domination,” “governance,” control—in short, governmentality—between “the state” and “the rebel militias.” What stands as “the state” has been a steady evolution of modes of dominance, at least since the 1960s, which initially consisted of a takeover of the resources of the state by force. At the time, Syria, in spite of a brief but unfortunate union with Egypt, “society” was still fairly liberal and democratic, hence the forced seizure of power by the Baath has ended decades of liberalism. In Iraq, the liberal bourgeois state of the old classes went down with the coup of Abdul-Karim Qasim in 1958, hence the Baath brought a permanent, if not everlasting blow, to that liberalism.

Now that Isis is gone from Aleppo since January 2014, the “opposition” has come under a conglomerate of groups known as the Islamic Front, a rebel coalition dominant in the city and much of northern Syria. The Islamic Front is a fierce and effective opponent of Isis but also, in its Islamist platform and indirect connections with al-Qaida is a different beast than the Free Syrian Army. The FSA, surrendered as it is now in the southern neighborhoods of Salah-u-ddin and Sukkari and Sayf al-Dawla, among others, which had inaugurated the battle for Aleppo back in July 2012 (in the first year of the insurgency, the city remained totally “silent,” as it did in the “great revolt” of 1925), without water, food, and ammunition, is allegedly negotiating with the Asad régime its surrender and withdrawal à la Hama (May 2014), that is, without punishment or retribution. We’ll come later for an explanation as to why the city was taken over by “outside” elements, which negotiated their way by force through the southern neighborhoods, prior to moving east. It remains uncertain how much “local” elements of the popular neighborhoods have “contributed” to the uprising, which adds to that problematic that we have been following regarding the lack of “political autonomy.” I want, for now at

least, to underscore that element of “externality” in the war process, and pose the question as to how “local” elements “articulate” with “external” ones coming from the “outside.” Let’s assume for now that, as we’ve witnessed it until the winter of 2011, there were more or less peaceful movements (from Damascus to Hims and Hama) which, facing the military brutality of the state apparatuses, were hijacked by militarized elements outside them, some of which, like Isis, were not even Syrian. Moreover, those peaceful demonstrations, which at some point in summer 2011 in Hama reached the million mark, had no particular organization. Their aim was punctual in the sense that they vaguely aimed at the presidency, even though the popular motto was no less than a “régime change.” For this very reason, the “opposition”-held areas in Aleppo and elsewhere cannot be said to be “opposed” to “the state” as such. There is an ambiguity to those militarized “oppositions” in their relations to the neighborhoods and the other localities which they have seized by force, on the one hand, and their relation to the state on the other; an ambiguity that we need to keep track of in its unraveling.

Isis’s abandoned headquarters in Aleppo are just across from another large building that serves as the base for Tawhid Brigade, one of the largest of the seven rebel groups that joined ranks together in November to form the Islamic Front. Isis had been present in opposition-held Aleppo since the beginning of 2013, but by the end of the year tensions with rebel groups had reached a crisis. Considering itself a sovereign state, Isis was refusing to accept mediation for any dispute, and it had taken to kidnapping those it considered to be critics or enemies, including people who worked with foreign journalists. Reporters found in its Aleppo abandoned building signs of prisoners being tortured and summarily executed (Matthieu Aikins, *The International New York Times*, July 8, 2014).

On January 7, Isis carried out a surprise attack on Tawhid Brigade’s headquarters. It was held off. The next day, Tawhid Brigade forces from around the city counterattacked and surrounded the hospital. “We cut them off and prevented them from bringing any support,” said the commander who led the offensive and who goes by the nom de guerre of Abu Assad.

At around 3 a.m., the Isis fighters trapped inside the hospital asked to be allowed to leave the city, and Abu Assad, not wanting further bloodshed, agreed. When he and his men searched the hospital at first light, they discovered that Isis had massacred its captives. “We found a group of bodies every ten meters,” said Abu Assad. Most of them had been shot in the head while bound. Not long after the battle, the rebels had recorded a footage of the liberation of the hospital and its aftermath which was posted on YouTube.

The battle against Isis in Aleppo is part of a larger conflict that started at the beginning of this year, as rebel groups across the northern provinces of Idlib and Aleppo—including the powerful Syrian al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra—fought a pitched battle to expel Isis. The face-off left the Islamic Front pre-eminent. It controls the key border crossing with Turkey at Azaz and, with its estimated 50,000 to 60,000 fighters, is thought to be the largest and most potent rebel alliance in Syria.

The Islamic Front is entirely Syrian in leadership, and its central goal is to overthrow the Asad régime. Many of the group's most powerful members—including the Tawhid Brigade and one of the largest factions fighting in the Damascus suburbs, Jaysh al-Islam—are not particularly ideological, and were once allied with the Western-backed Free Syrian Army.

But they are far from secular. The Islamic Front draws on support from pre-war Islamist resistance networks, including wealthy, religious donors across the Muslim world and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and exiled Islamist group, who turned underground in 1982, amid the massacres and destruction of Hama, which pitted at the time the régime of Asad-père against the Brotherhood. (The mini-civil war was initiated in 1979 when allegedly members of the Brotherhood killed dozens of Alawi officers at the Artillery School in Aleppo, turning many of the city's popular neighborhoods unsafe in their fight against the régime.)

One of the coalition's key members, Aḥrār al-Shām, has links to al-Qaida's core leadership, and the Islamic Front as a whole closely coordinates operations with Jabhat al-Nusra.

By the summer of 2014, the Islamic Front, together with Jabhat al-Nusra, and the FSA, are fighting a battle of survival in Aleppo, which has been cleared out of Isis. The régime's armed forces, which look more and more like a popular militia, with 10,000 plus Lebanese Hezbollah militiamen on their side, not to mention Iranian military "experts," Russian support and so on, are preparing for a major offensive against Aleppo this winter. That would entail a complete takeover of the eastern and southern popular neighborhoods, and the expulsion of the Islamist militias. Already, we are told, the FSA, which controls its own neighborhoods in the south, where the battle has originally started in 2012, is in negotiation mode with the régime: to surrender with our lives and equipment intact. If such an offensive turns out a "success," the régime will be left with Isis in the east, its main opponent, and various rebel groups in the Idlib and Hama provinces, not to mention the Damascus–Hims countryside, and the border with Israel.

For its part Isis controls territories in the central north and the north-east, which since June it has "opened" to Iraq by seizing most of the Iraqi border crossings. What is important for our purposes, from the perspective we have been following, is to document *how* Isis has tightened its grip on the territories it has controlled in the Syrian north and east: what are the procedures, and how this control is negotiated on the ground with tribes, villages, neighborhoods and cities. A Lebanese reporter, writing from Amman, Jordan, has noted that Isis uses different modes of domination between Syria and Iraq, where the movement had originated during the American occupation. In Iraq negotiations with the tribes and the underground Sunni militias are more "subtle," in the sense that they take into consideration the latter's "interests," not to mention the Sunni–Shi'i divide which is inexistent in Syria. Thus, the Iraqi Isis takes the others as "partners," while managing the overall operation. It has

adopted, in some ways, the policies that Saddam Hussein, the Americans, and the government of Nuri al-Maliki had opted with those same groups.

In Syria things are a bit different. In light of its June successes at expanding in central “Sunni” Iraq, Isis (now “the Islamic State” pure and simple since the first day of Ramadan) decided to tighten its grip on the Dayr al-Zor region (which has been renamed “wilāyat al-khayr,” the province of goodness, upon the declaration of the caliphate on the first of Ramadan). For one thing, the region is the only oil-producing area in Syria, and Isis managed to control the majority of the oil wells for at least a year, even selling its services to the Asad régime. For another, it wants to establish in every locality a long-term mode of domination: *how* that is achieved is our concern in this section.

The eastern town of al-Shaḥīl is mostly tribal in its composition, known to have been a stronghold of the Nusra front, for the simple reason that its leader Abu Muhammad Jūlānī comes from there, hence his nom de guerre is supposed to divert attention, while manifesting sympathy for the occupied Golan Heights. In July 2014 Isis forced more than 30,000 inhabitants of Shaḥīl to leave their homes, having already tortured and mutilated Kurdish fighters in the north, and executed opponents in those same areas (al-Hayat, Beirut, July 7, 2014). The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the only agency to have documented such executions and the forcing out of populations since 2011, claimed that an additional 30,000 were forced to leave (hijra) in the area of Dayr al-Zor in the towns of Khushām (at least 15,500 inhabitants) and Ṭābiyeh (15,000). Many of the Islamist groups mentioned above gave their bay‘a to “caliph Ibrahim” in the first week of Ramadan upon the latter declaring himself the amīr al mu‘minīn, as did the two towns in the second of July. But Isis would nevertheless not permit the inhabitants back until they’ve been “forgiven” (tawbah) for what they did, that is, for having sided with Nusra and fought the Islamic State. To the inhabitants the sine qua non condition of “forgiveness” is only an excuse for a permanent hijra.

On the other hand, having seized all oil fields in Day al-Zor, except for the one located at Ward, which has only one well producing 200 barrels a day, Isis began selling crude oil for SP2,000 a barrel or \$12, but it forces those same merchants for selling it at no more than \$18 in order to accommodate more popular support in its own areas. However, such prices are much lower than when the oil fields were controlled by various Islamic militias, including Isis, at which time, back in 2013, the militants used to sell the oil at the high price of \$30 to \$50 a barrel. Isis is also planning to sell gas demijohns in the areas under its control, sprawling from Dayr al-Zor to the eastern suburbs of Aleppo, the Turkish–Syrian frontier, and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab, with the exception of areas under Kurdish domination, in addition to the eastern countryside of Hims and Hama, and other areas, the total of which (excluding Iraq) is five times the Republic of Lebanon.

Nor is the management of crony capitalism the only talent that Isis has developed in the largest stretches that it has seized between Syria and Iraq. In early July, in the south of Hasakeh, a city in the north-east with a majority of Kurdish population (together with Assyrians and other Christian minorities), Isis fighters have mutilated the bodies of Kurdish militiamen from “the Units for the protection of the Kurdish people” which were killed in action when Isis attacked villages in the area west of ‘Ayn al-‘Arab. The bodies were hanged in public on podiums in the presence of small kids, after exposing the bodies in the Jرابلس area.

A pattern has therefore emerged which consists in the following: (1) seizure of a territory by force through military might; (2) the territory could be as small as a single neighborhood, a village, a town, a countryside, or as big as Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city; (3) the technique of warfare consists of guerrilla warfare in small numbers, not frontal attacks (cf. T.E. Lawrence on guerrilla warfare against the Turkish army in the Hijaz); (4) Isis would “share” those conquered territorial units with its “opponents” (Kurds, Nusra Front, FSA, the Islamic Front, all of which have shared territories against their absolute enemy, the Asad régime; however, allegations that Isis is an “offshoot” of the Asad régime seem unfounded; the régime, until recently, with Isis’s expansion in central Iraq has been more “lenient” with the Islamic State, probably because it served as a tool to simultaneously weaken the FSA and Islamic Front; Jūlanī has been released from the jail of Şadnāyā at the end of 2011, so that the régime would point fingers at “Islamic terrorism” among opposition ranks) but only if it finds itself in a “weak” position, that is, unable to dominate the others; (5) Isis is more at ease when it is in full control of a territory, rather than sharing it; (6) when it is in a full-control mode, Isis would accept no less than the full “subjugation” of the populations under its control; if the latter had fought against Isis they should ask for repentance (tawbah) and openly give their mubāya‘a or bay‘a to the new caliph (and the institution of the caliphate); (7) Isis would then establish an “economy of war” in the conquered territories, whereby it would control the most lucrative resources available, beginning with the oil fields, trade routes and businesses. Isis would impose itself as a complete monopoly in a “marginal” capitalist economy where the common people would not be allowed to compete with the master. It would allow anything that would give it the income it needs (its estimated budget allegedly stands at \$50 million a month). For example, a member of the Majādhmah tribe in the Minbij area told me that a Turkish cell company decided to plant a reception tower near their village, considering that the only two Syrian cell companies have been for the most part cut off in the north. Isis agrees, only because it receives commissions from the Turks, and the more Syrian consumers buy minutes from the Turkish cell company, the better.

The main point is this: the mode of “domination” remains fairly superficial—at the surface—which only involves “allegiance,” but no new social bonds, no hegemony, class alliances and the like. In short, it is dominance by force but without hegemony. We need to question whether such mode of dominance is in any way different from that that has been instituted by the Baathist state for over half a century, or whether there is anything unique to it.

Let us take as example of the process of negotiation and the economy of war in the province of Dayr al-Zor which is almost fully under Isis's control.

In early July the people of the town of al-Qūriyyah took to the streets at night to demonstrate their unwillingness to let Isis rule their small town (al-Hayat, 9 July 2014). As reported in al-Hayat, from the London-based Marṣad of Human Rights, negotiations were soon initiated between the elders of the tribes of the western countryside (Khaṭṭ al-Shāmiyyah), and the leaders of the Islamic Brigades, on the one hand, with Isis on the other side. The purpose was to achieve an end to war and settle peace between all parties.

What is interesting here were the conditions (shurūṭ) set by the tribes and the Islamic Brigades—as a single party—for a settlement.

1. The Islamic Brigades would keep their infrastructure intact in all the western countryside of Dayr al-Zor, but would nevertheless declare their bay'a to Isis and uphold its banner (rāyah).
2. The Brigades would not deliver their armaments, heavy or small, to Isis.
3. Isis would only enter the western countryside in small numbers, to be limited to the “immigrants” (muhājirīn) only, that is to say, from non-Syrian citizenships; thus, Syrian citizens are not welcomed at all.
4. No one that Isis has on its lists of wanted persons would be arrested.
5. All parties would agree to fight the [Asad] régime.
6. The formation of a shar'i board (hay'a shar'iyya) that would be common to Isis and the other parties.

The Marṣad's “witness” on the ground added that Isis's prime response was that “there is no negotiation unless the other parties give up all their arms.”

Whatever the outcome of such negotiations, what is interesting here are the conditions set by the tribes and their militias on the ground, that is, the original populations of the western countryside in Dayr al-Zor. What is revealing in the list of the six “conditions” above is that the tribes and their affiliated militias would declare the bay'a on the proviso that they keep their arms and military infrastructure intact. The bay'a therefore seems like a minor event, which could be negotiated and exchanged at face value, practically bearing no importance in relation to any essence, which is the military economy of those tribes and their sense of autonomy. Moreover, the insistence on “immigrants”—that is, strangers, which could be Arab, African, Asians, or Europeans—over Syrians points to the fact that the main problem resides in the allocation of power relations among “Syrian” tribes. The bay'a, therefore, provides that institutional umbrella through which the likes of Isis operate: subjugate groups to Isis's dominance by giving them rewards which were initially withdrawn from them. In some ways, Isis's “politics” borrows similar mottos from the Baathist state, not to mention French colonial rule or the Ottomans.

The bay‘a is a sign of loyalty that takes place on a one-to-one basis: not only a specific tribe, but every faction of the tribe (‘ashīra) must *specifically* declare its loyalty; and so would each faction of the fighting brigades. Which makes the bay‘a a quintessential *speech act*: an act of declaration where the loyalty of the tribe and its affiliated brigade is openly declared in public. Thus, based on the above report (al-Hayat, 9 July 2014), the “majority” of the “forces on the ground” have openly declared “their bay‘a to the Islamic State and the caliph of all Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [a.k.a. Khalifa Ibrahim].” Those “powers” (*jihāt*, “directive forces”) on the ground are then enumerated one-by-one: the people of the town of Ṣubaykhān, Dablān, Ghuraybah, al-Kashmah, Duwayr; then follows the enumeration of the Jund al-Sham Brigades, a total of 12, whose names include common male or female heroic personalities in Islamic history, locations, or metaphors: al-Mu‘taṣim bi-l-llāh, Nūr al-Islām, Jund Allāh, al-Ḥārith, Khālīd ibn al-Walīd, ‘Aysha umm al-Mu‘minīn, etc. The *naming* is here important because it is inscribed within the logic of speech act: the point of honor of the party that declares the bay‘a to the caliph and caliphate—and to itself—and that would do everything that it takes to remain “loyal.” But then the bay‘a is characterized by a logic of domination which practically leaves intact the structure of the groups that have “subjugated” themselves to the conquering group, or other tribes or tribal factions, or “the state” for that matter, or in the not-so-remote-past local “administrations” which worked on behalf of the far away Ottoman state.

One should note here that if the tribes and tribal factions (‘ashāyir) have manifested *some* resistance to Isis, setting at times conditions for their “surrender,” it is because the tribes of the east are better structured and “harder” than the ones in the central-north in the region of Raqqa, which has become Isis’s official headquarters since 2013. In this instance, the fragility and tenuousness of tribal structures makes them vulnerable to the likes of Isis (and to the other Islamic Brigades as well), a vulnerability that was already manifest under the Baathist state for over half a century.

Mustafa al-Burayji, an astute observer located in the city of Raqqa, told al-Hayat (July 11, 2014): “Once Isis has entered the city as a faction, it rushed at finding a partner (*rāfid*) among the society of tribes in the province, in which it found an easy prey, considering the fragility and tenuousness of those tribes. Which gave the latter the opportunity to look for easy money and status. Isis was in the meantime using a combination of force and promises through its armed men which were kidnapping (abducting) and beheading their opponents at the sight of the shaykhs of the tribes, helped in this by young members of the tribe of Burayj which had given their bay‘a to the organization. That was the beginning of a bay‘a process that took one tribe after another, beginning with Burayj and ending with ‘Ujayl, Bu Jāber, Subkhah, ‘Afādilah, Bu ‘Assāf, Hunādah, al-Shibl, al-Sakhānī, al-Ḥuwaywāt, and Zurashmar... That was completed with the tribes east of Aleppo, represented by the Bubnah in Minbij, and the Khaffājah in Maskanah, in addition to the tribal factions of al-Barri, the Ḥadīdiyyīn, and the Nu‘aymāt... The leaders of those tribes and tribal factions were led in the past to manifest their loyalty to

then-president Hafiz al-Asad for the sake of some money and racketeering (*ṣuṭwa*) which his Baathist governments¹⁴ had deprived them of.”

Note how an observer who is resident of the city knows for sure how to *name* the tribes *one by one* (the naming of their “affiliated” brigades, however, is quite different), because naming in relation to the bay‘a only happens on a one-to-one basis. That is to say: tribes would not give their “allegiance” *collectively*, that would be a meaningless act pure and simple. To understand why this is the case, we need to understand that for each bay‘a with one of the tribes or the tribal factions (‘ashāyir) comes an individual “reward” for the tribe in question. The “reward” would invariably give the tribe “privileges” over an area, like the collection of fees, dues, and racketeering schemes. Such “privileges” would be “on behalf” of Isis, or any other group. But what distinguishes Isis from the other military groups is their systematic requirement of the bay‘a, as the sine qua non condition for the survival of the organization in its newly conquered milieus.

Considering that the tribes and tribal factions have not for the most part invested themselves in men and equipment in the civil war, the bay‘a comes as the closest “investment” in the war effort. However, the bay‘a would neither entail much submission to the “strong” party, nor an “ideological” commitment of sorts. In effect, the bay‘a entails submission to the party which happens to have controlled the area in question, which in this instance is no one else but Isis; other areas which are controlled by the Nuṣra Front manifest their allegiance to al-Qaida’s leader Z̤awāhiri and his “affiliate” J̤ulānī (the latter had already given his bay‘a to the former). In all such instances, however, there is no ideological commitment, but only an organization of power relations whereby the “subjugated” party would receive a modicum of “economic” privileges, but not much in the order of the political and ideological. All of this does not so much point in the direction of Isis’s strength, but more in the direction of the fragmentation of tribal formations, in particular in the central north of the country, more specifically, the territories located between the east of Aleppo up to ‘Ayn al-‘Arab. But even where the tribes are stronger, as in the Dayr al-Zor region, along the border with Iraq, the process is in the final analysis not much different. For their part, the likes of Isis and Nuṣra behave as if the tribal structure would not matter much to their own internal organizations, as they approach them from the “outside”—domination without hegemony. To wit, whenever Isis imposes its well famed “Islamic norms,” based on its own self-appointed marja‘iyya, on a territory, such “norms” leave intact tribal structure, neighborhoods, towns and villages. In short, there is no attempt to “integrate” through newly imposed norms: they only are imposed norms without processes of normalization. Thus, for example, because in the process of the bay‘a what matters first and foremost are the “trusted authorities” (al-thiqāt), Isis has set in Dayr al-Zor an office which is presided by a man from the Burayj tribal faction, which handles more security issues rather than administrative ones.

¹⁴ Of the so-called “corrective movement,” *ḥaraka taṣḥīḥiyya*, which “corrected” and acted upon the early Baath of the 1960s.

At times, a tribe's "strength" might give it additional privileges. For example, the *bādiya* of Dayr al-Zor hosts some of the most powerful tribes, such as the 'Uqaydāt and Baqqārah, which in turn are composed of several tribal factions ('ashāyir), and which have not "urbanized" as the Raqqa tribes did. Thus, the "integrity" of the 'Uqaydāt has pushed the Asad-père régime to strengthen its ties with it for 40 years, to the point that the eastern town of al-Muḥsin became known as "the treasury of the officers of the Syrian army." For his part, Asad-père had crowned his associations with the eastern tribes by marrying his son Maher to the daughter of the chief of the tribal faction of al-Jud'ān.

The various bay'as and counter-bay'as to either Isis or the Nuṣra did not quell the competition among tribes and their factions, in particular in the presence of oil in the eastern regions, and the advantage that Isis has manifested in its thorough organization across "national" territories and in its control of the Iraqī-Syrian border on both sides. As the tribal chief of the Bū Sarāya noted, "Isis knows how to give the best offer when it comes to oil, which drives competition and fitna among the tribes, which in turn drives some tribes outside the competition because they bear no interest on the matter, such as ours" (al-Hayat, July 11, 2014).

Such "allocations" of revenues, oil or otherwise, which are the property of the Syrian state in the first place, could turn violent. The Dayr al-Zor region thus enflamed when Amer Rafdan, a leading tribesman from the 'Uqaydāt, was shot to death, having turned against Jūlanī for the sake of Baghdādī, endorsing the latter with his full bay'a. The leader of Isis had in effect approached Rafdan with a lucrative deal apropos oil revenues. The new deal—and bay'a—gave Isis unprecedented control over the oil wells of Jafrah, Koniko, Khashshām and Jadīd 'Uqaydāt, while leaving tribal equilibrium in limbo, with continuous warfare between the Bū Jāmel, on the Nuṣra side, and the Bakīr, on the Isis side. The "deal" seems to work, therefore, on both sides. Isis (or the Nuṣra for that matter) is unable to exploit the oil resources on its own, without the protection that the tribes could furnish to the wells, and the latter have proven unable to organize on their own to exploit the oil wells.

Such divisions came in conjunction with rifts within the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) whose Dayr al-Zor military decided to give its bay'a to Isis, which led the latter to take more oil wells in addition to gas pipelines worth billions of dollars, leading also, out of fear, to more bay'a among tribes that have thus far been "neutral," such as the Bū 'Izz al-Dīn and the Baqqārah. In sum, Isis is now in nearly full control of Dayr al-Zor, its countryside and desert, having subdued to it the Nuṣra, the FSA, and the tribal factions, all through lucrative oil and gas deal, which involve protection of the well and pipelines on one side, and the commercialization of the products on the other. However, with all kind of rifts among the tribes and the militias, and the oil wells nearby, the "eternal peace" is not there yet.

On July 18, 2014, Isis was unexpectedly able to expand further from its northern Raqqa and Dayr al-Zor base, when it was able to capture the al-Shā'ir gas field located in the province of

Hims in the vicinity of the historical town of Palmyra (Tadmur), posing it close to the central cities of Hims and Hama.¹⁵ Beyond that Isis now controls the quasi-totality of oil and gas production in the country, which de facto implies controlling the production of electricity. In effect, the al-Shā'ir gas field was inaugurated in 2011, the year of the insurgency, with the hope that Syria would replace the costly fuel oil with gas in the production of electricity. It remains to be seen whether the Syrian army would be able to recapture the field, or if Isis maintains itself, whether it would do business with the Syrian state, as it did once it captured the Dayr al-Zor oil fields.

Economic and political strategy aside, what is interesting here is the military strategy which followed the usual mix of the surprise element with brutality: released videotapes show over a hundred bodies from the security forces which were guarding the compound, and which seem to have been summarily executed, while an additional 250 or so security personnel and employees have been declared missing. Apparently, Germans participated in the attack.

V. Conclusion: permanent wars of attrition

The middle east is currently plagued by protracted wars of attrition. With the end of Empire and colonialism, the postwar era has produced authoritarian, if not totalitarian (or fascist), states for which Egypt and Syria would serve as prototype. What needs to be analyzed, therefore, is the nature of the Arab authoritarian states, their connections to their Ottoman and colonial past, and the kind of "society" that has emerged out of the postwar era.

The prototype of the authoritarian state that grew in Egypt in the wake of the Free Officers revolution in 1952 has spread all over the Arab world and the eastern Mediterranean: Iraq in 1958 and 1963, Syria in 1963, and Libya in 1969; the cycle came to an end with the Iranian revolution in 1978–79 which brought down a well established tradition of Shi'i monarchism. Thus, by the 1970s, the Middle East was already locked politically with Nasserism, Baathism, and the Iranian Khomeinist theocracy. Other non-state "movements," of the like of Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories and the Hezbollah in Lebanon, are offshoots of the other statist movements in the area. The social movements that have spawned since 2011, either peacefully or violently—the so-called "Arab Spring"—have attempted to break down such political stalemate, to no avail. Which placed countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Libya, directly in a situation of protracted wars, sprawling across porous borders. Military groups, mostly with jihadic insight and strategy, have been moving in the last couple of years across borders, gaining territory, while imposing their own economic and political rules. In the meantime, the state has become *one* force on the ground among many others, with an incomplete inability to recapture lost territories.

¹⁵ Al-Safir, Beirut, 19 July 2014.

The structure of such states invariably points to an esprit de corps (*‘aṣabiyya*) that constitutes itself through bonds of consanguinity, though is not limited to the latter. Thus, Iraq had been managed since the 1970s until the American occupation in 2003 by the Sunni Tikriti clan to which belonged former presidents Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein; for the same period, until now, Syria’s state has been dominated by the Alawi Asad clan; Iran’s Islamic Republic is dominated by a brand of Persian-speaking Shi‘ism known as the Twelver Imamism, operating under Khomeini’s doctrine of the “jurist’s political authority,” and which although numerically superior to all other “ethnic minorities,” only survives through the brutal marginalization of the latter (Kurds, Sunnis, Arabs, Azeris, Turcomans, Baloch, Armenians, Jews, Christians, Baha’is, etc.). Thus, the *‘aṣabiyya*-rentier “state” structurally survives by limiting itself to a *faction* of its “ethnic” belonging: when Baathism was the ideology of the Iraqi state, it was not the Sunnis that were in control, as the common assumption goes, but only the Tikritis among the Sunnis; or, in Baathist Syria, it is not the Alawis who are in control, but a *faction* of the Alawis which have managed to marginalize the other tribes and clans, subserving them by military might, without, however, breaking their internal bonds. To be sure, such *‘aṣabiyya* processes of marginalization did not happen overnight, as they took decades of military coups and political maneuvering to unravel.

The *‘aṣabiyya*-rentier “state” leaves its imprints on all aspects of the civilian bureaucracy and the military, and various apparatuses, in particular the intelligence services, republican and revolutionary guards, and paramilitary forces, whose main concern is not the safety of the “national” territory per se, but the *‘aṣabiyya* sitting on the top, imposing itself by force on other *‘aṣabiyyas*, tribes, clans, religious groups and ethnicities. As such, it is neither a “state” nor a modern *nation*-state, which *de jure* would have to politically protect its “society” of individual citizens *as a totality*. In its stead, the *‘aṣabiyya*-driven “state” creates a “society” at its own image, one whose societal bonds are fragmented and tied to the main dominating *‘aṣabiyya*, where associationism is constantly hampered by political pressures.

It goes without saying that countries of the Arab Spring have either totally deteriorated (Syria, Yemen, and Libya, not to mention the breakdown of Iraq in summer 2014, all of which are into full-fledged civil wars with no end in sight; or the partition of Sudan in 2012, which led to a reinstatement of the civil war in the oil-rich south between the two dominant tribal factions), or else have nominally changed, otherwise they’re into the same kind of rule dominated by the military and intelligence apparatuses, in spite of all claims for “free” parliamentary and presidential elections (Egypt and Tunisia; not to mention an early participant in the Arab Spring, Bahrain, where the Shi‘a majority has been claiming its “right” vis-à-vis a Saudi-protected Sunni monarchy, to no avail). It remains unclear, however, how we proceed from there. Is this the price to pay for the *apparent* dismantlement of the “model” of the authoritarian “state” that saw light with the free officers’ “revolution” in Egypt in 1952, and which was replicated in Iraq in 1958, Syria in 1963, and Libya in 1969?

What seems clear, at least for now, is that the “socialist” “state,” as constructed by the likes of Nasser in Egypt and the Baath In Iraq and Syria, which has clamed full “inclusivity” to the populations at large, with all their regional differences, ethnicities, and religions, was by and large unrepresentative of “civil society.” Not only did it fail at “representation,” understood as the right of difference, but it hampered the work of “associationism” which proves necessary for the survival of “civil society.” What we are witnessing right now, in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, is the very impossibility of the continuation of such a pattern of statist political domination as instituted by Nasserism and Baathism. It remains unclear, however, what the alternatives are and what kind of “replacement” could be envisaged. In the early days of the so-called Arab Spring crowds from Tunis to Cairo and Manama in Bahrain were chanting the promises of a “democratic” state, one that accommodates the rule of law, an impersonal bureaucracy, and accountability, and where religion would not matter in politics. Needless to say, such rosy future is at best uncertain.