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Book review

Syria's Unfinished Revolution

- Reviews section -

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Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience by Joseph Daher. Haymarket Books, 2019, 386 pages, \$29 paperback.

PERHAPS MORE THAN any other recent question, the Syrian Revolution confused and divided the international left. Many dismissed the revolt as a “color revolution” orchestrated by the United States, and some became willing spokespeople for Bashar al-Assad’s regime, recycling its talking points and conspiracy theories.

Syrian revolutionaries, principled leftists, and honest journalists have countered these lies in countless articles and books. Among this vast literature, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami’s *Burning Country*, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh’s *The Impossible Revolution*, Gilbert Achcar’s two volumes, *The People Want* and *Morbid Symptoms*, and most recently Sam Dagher’s devastating account of Syria’s sadistic dictatorship, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, should be considered essential reading.

Together these provide socialists with both an understanding of the Syrian Revolution and a methodology for how to stand in solidarity with it and similar struggles against oppressive states, regardless of which imperial power’s sphere of influence or “camp” they are in.

Joseph Daher’s new book, *Syria After the Uprisings*, is perhaps the most detailed and comprehensive explanation of the nature of the Syrian state, the causes and character of the revolution, and the reasons for its defeat and, in the words of the book’s subtitle, the “state resilience” of Assad’s regime.

The Patrimonial State

Daher rejects analyses that obscure the reality of the revolution by characterizing it, in the rhetoric of the regime, as a geopolitical struggle between states or even worse a mere conflict among religious sects and ethnicities. Instead, from a Marxist vantage point, he argues that any account of the revolution must analyze the “political and socioeconomic dynamics at the root of the conflict.”

That must begin with a precise understanding of the regime created by Hafez al-Assad and ruled by his son Bashar and the economy it oversaw. Drawing on Gilbert Achcar’s account of state formation in the Middle East and North Africa, Daher classifies the Assads’ regime as a patrimonial state; the family essentially owns the state and enriches itself and its cronies through state and private capitalist ownership of the means of production.

It constructed the regime around a nucleus of their co-religionists in the country’s Alawite minority in the petty bourgeoisie and the military’s officer core. It also incorporated a layer of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of all sects and ethnicities through state contracts and employment in the state bureaucracy.

The regime has ruled the country with an iron fist, creating what Syrians call a “kingdom of silence” that denied democratic liberties, banned all opposition parties and independent unions, and jailed, tortured and killed anyone that stood in its way. But it did not rule by force alone.

As Daher shows, the regime developed elaborate mechanisms for incorporation of sections of the population through

the Baath Party, the religious establishments of all sects, state-controlled unions and peasant associations, and provision of state services.

It also used anti-imperialist rhetoric to rally popular support, even while it pursued back channel relations with the United States and Israel.

It perfected a strategy of divide and rule, playing sects and ethnicities off one another to prevent united popular opposition. The regime postured as protectors of Alawites and other religious minorities against the Sunni majority, while it similarly manipulated the division between the country's Arab majority and oppressed Kurdish minority.

Neoliberalism Stokes Grievances

All these mechanisms created what appeared to be a stable regime. But upon his succession to his father's rule, Bashar al-Assad implemented market reforms, winning praise from Hillary Clinton and the International Monetary Fund but compromising the regime's structures of incorporation.

He conducted crony privatization of state companies to his friends and family, cut state employment and services, and opened Syria to the world economy. While these measures enriched the increasingly Allawi elite base of the regime, they impoverished workers and farmers and cut off avenues for advancement for sections of the middle class, especially students.

Like the other regimes in the region, Assad's state was sitting upon a volcano of pent up political and economic grievances. Daher notes, "The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of large parts of Syrian society, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequalities, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which thus needed no more than a spark."

The Popular Revolution

The Arab Spring provided that spark, detonating a multi-class revolt in Syria. It included a small section of the bourgeoisie, a larger layer of the middle class students, and poor mostly Sunni workers in provincial cities and the suburbs of the main cities like Aleppo. These class forces staged massive demonstrations throughout the country.

Daher engages in no romantic portrait of this uprising, but a balanced one, pointing to its strengths as well its weaknesses and flaws. He notes that while the protests were concentrated in the Sunni population, the rising included all sects and ethnicities, promising unity against the regime through the slogan, "The Syrian People Are One."

The movement initially raised modest demands for reform, but when faced with massive state repression turned revolutionary, calling just like all the revolts in the Arab Spring for the downfall of the regime. The movement advanced demands for democracy, equality and women's rights.

To cohere the uprising, activists created Local Coordination Committees and Local Councils. While these represented attempts to build an alternative to Assad's state, they were not based in workplaces, and their leaders were often unelected but instead self-selected, frequently made up of activists from middle-class sectors.

The revolution stumbled over the deep divisions that the regime has used against the population. Thus, Daher documents how some Sunnis raised sectarian slogans toward Allawis and how some Arabs rejected Kurdish demands for self-determination.

Forced Militarization

The regime rejected the uprising's demands for reform and tried to crush it with the full might of its police and military. The revolutionaries had no choice but to arm themselves in self-defense, but when they did so they encountered several problems, which Daher argues they were never able to overcome.

They created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) largely out of local volunteers and thousands of deserters from the military who brought with them guns and materiel. The combination of the popular revolt and the FSA enabled the liberation of whole sections of the country.

At the beginning the FSA was non-sectarian and committed to democracy and liberation. But it never became a centralized military force and lacked internal sources of funding. Desperate for help, they turned to external forces among the Gulf States, Turkey, and the expatriate formations they sponsored like the Syrian National Council (SNC) and its successors.

The FSA's dependence on these international actors exacerbated internal divisions within the revolution. These did not share the democratic aspirations of the revolution but pursued their own geopolitical and sectarian aims.

The SNC, sponsored by Qatar and Turkey, was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood which adopted sectarian policies toward Allawis and bigoted ones against Kurds. Similarly, Saudi Arabia strengthened other Islamic fundamentalist currents in the resistance hostile to religious minorities and the Kurds.

As Daher notes, "the failure to constitute an independent and organized social and political force with some forms of centralization created a vacuum in which other internal and external actors were able to intervene and instrumentalize the opposition, armed and civilian, to the detriment of the protest movement."

Resilience of Assad's State

Despite losing whole swathes of the country to the revolution, Daher shows, Assad's state never cracked. Its clientelism retained the loyalty of most of the bourgeoisie of all denominations, and those sections that did break with it fled the country.

The regime also maintained the allegiance or at least passivity of most of the professional middle class employed by the state. Though they chafed at the dictatorship's suppression of their rights, they balked at risking their stable lives to join the revolution and the impoverished working class that drove it forward.

Thus the regime's ruling class base and state bureaucracy held firm. Incredibly, the state managed to provide services throughout the country for the duration of the conflict.

On top of all this, the regime's military officer core, which was predominantly Alawite but also included Sunnis, remained rock solid. It did lose tens of thousands of Sunni rank-and-file soldiers, and it did not trust those that remained. But the Air Force never wavered, and Assad used it to relentlessly bomb the FSA and civilian

revolutionaries.

Weaponizing Sectarianism

With the state and its ruling and middle class base intact, Assad tried to divide the uprising along sectarian and ethnic lines. From the beginning he portrayed the revolution as a foreign-sponsored Sunni Islamic fundamentalist threat to the country's religious minorities.

He postured as their secular defender. Of course this was a lie, and Daher exposes it; the regime had long sponsored quietist versions of all the conservative religious establishments and, even worse, welcomed jihadists to use Syria as a base of operations against the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Assad even released key jihadist leaders from his dungeons with the hope that they'd form militias that would break the original multi-sect and multi-ethnic unity of the revolution and threaten religious and Kurdish minorities. Once they did exactly that, he could claim that he had no choice but to conduct his own war on terror against them.

With the rise of ISIS, the bastard offspring of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Assad had his perfect alibi. But Assad never conducted a war against it nor the other Islamic fundamentalist forces, but instead relentlessly attack the revolutionaries.

Dividing Arabs and Kurds

Daher further shows how the regime exploited the Arab force's failure to defend Kurdish rights to self-determination to split a possible united front between the two groups. He shows how the regime had long manipulated this division.

It had allowed the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to base its operations against in Turkey in Syria on the condition that it never raise demands to advance the interests of Syrian Kurds, and then expelled the group in 1998 to curry favor with Turkey. It thus cynically postured as an advocate of the Kurds abroad, while it denied them language rights and citizenship at home.

The PKK eventually formed a Syrian sister group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which suffered brutal repression at the hands of the regime. The Syrian revolution provided Kurds the space to rise up and the PYD eventually established itself as their movement's hegemonic party.

To prevent Arab and Kurdish unity, Assad ceded territory to the PYD where they established their semi-autonomous area called Rojava. While this achievement was unimaginable without the Syrian revolution, the PYD never extended solidarity to the revolution, preferring to consolidate their own one-party state.

Daher argues that however progressive it was on some questions, especially women's rights, it was not democratic or inclusive. In actual fact, it was viewed by Kurds and especially Arabs in Rojava more as a lesser evil compared to Assad and his Islamic fundamentalist opponents.

Imperial & Regional Powers Intervene

The regime, though, would probably have fallen if not for the intervention of imperial and regional powers, particularly Russia, Iran and its proxy force, Hezbollah. Each did so for different reasons and aims.

Russia, argues Daher, was primarily concerned with preserving its relationship with its historic ally in Syria, retaining and modernizing its sole naval base in the region, using the deployment of its forces to drum up weapons sales, and project itself as a power in the region and internationally against the United States. It backed up the regime with its air force, overwhelmingly targeting the revolutionary forces.

Iran backed Assad to secure another ally in addition to Iraq, to form an axis of states aligned with it against the United States and the Gulf monarchies. Daher shows how it invested massive sums of money, helped the regime build militias to substitute for Syria's unreliable army, and deployed Hezbollah to back these up, enabling the regime to turn the tide on the ground.

The United States, Gulf monarchies and Turkey intervened as well, each with their own imperial and regional aims, none of which served the interests of the revolution.

Contrary to conspiracy mongers on the left, U.S. strategy never aimed for regime change, but for regime preservation — at first aiming to replace Assad with one of his generals, only to abandon that goal to focus entirely on bombing ISIS and backing the PYD and its Syrian Democratic Forces as its proxy ground forces in this fight.

Israel barely lifted a finger against the regime, only demanding U.S. action to stop Assad's use of chemical weapons and to attack Hezbollah, which it views as a threat to its colonial project. It did not object to Assad retaining power, because as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, "We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights."

Qatar backed the reactionary Muslim Brotherhood in the hopes of projecting itself as a regional power in competition with Saudi Arabia, which supported other fundamentalist elements in the expatriate and internal forces. Both hoped to weaken Iran as a regional power.

Turkey, which had had established elaborate economic relationships with Assad's regime, broke with it and backed Islamic fundamentalist forces, but after the rise of the PYD completely shifted its focus to a monomaniacal focus on destroying Rojava, which they feared would become a base of operations for a renewed struggle for Kurdish self-determination.

Now with the Syrian Revolution defeated, the regime has retaken most of the country and stands poised to take advantage of Turkey's invasion, greenlighted by both Russia and the United States, to force the capitulation of the PYD.

The price of Assad's counterrevolution is nothing short of catastrophic — the destruction of whole cities and neighborhoods, the death of 2.3 million people, the displacement over 12 million people, half the country's pre-war population, and the expulsion of 5.5 million refugees into wretched conditions mostly in the region's other countries.

The regime has begun to implement a "shock doctrine with sectarian characteristics" to rebuild Syria. It has distributed reconstruction contracts to its loyal bourgeoisie, especially among the Alawites, to redevelop land seized from the mostly Sunni populations that fled, for housing and shopping areas for the elites.

Opening an Epoch of Revolution

Assad's victory in no way guarantees stability. As Daher argues, "the conditions that led to the uprisings are still present, and the regime is very far from resolving them and indeed has actually deepened them. Damascus and other regional capitals believe that they can maintain their despotic rules and orders at all cost by the continuous use of massive violence against their populations. This is doomed to fail, and new explosions of popular anger are to be expected, as demonstrated by new and massive protests in Sudan and Algeria."

The missing element in this longterm revolutionary process, though, is the subjective force, the organizations, parties and unions armed with politics to lead the struggle for democracy and equality. But as he notes, the "revolutionary uprising of 2011 with its vast documentary archive, will remain in the popular memory and be a crucial resource for those who resist in the future."

Daher's book is part of that archive and should be read by activists and socialists not only in Syria and the Middle East and North Africa, but throughout the world. It can help political forces learn lessons from the last wave of revolts so that they have a better chance for victory next time.

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