

## The Revolutionary Distemper in Syria That Wasn't. US-NATO Sponsored Al Qaeda Insurgency Since the Outset in March 2011

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*Apparently, the US Left has yet to figure out that Washington doesn't try to overthrow neoliberals. If Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were a devotee of the Washington Consensus—as Counterpunch's Eric Draitser seems to believe—the United States government wouldn't have been calling since 2003 for Assad to step down. Nor would it be overseeing the Islamist guerilla war against his government; it would be protecting him.*

There is a shibboleth in some circles that, as Eric Draitser put it in a recent Counterpunch article, the uprising in Syria “began as a response to the Syrian government’s neoliberal policies and brutality,” and that “the revolutionary content of the rebel side in Syria has been sidelined by a hodgepodge of Saudi and Qatari-financed jihadists.” This theory appears, as far as I can tell, to be based on argument by assertion, not evidence.



Mass demonstration in support of Syria's secular Arab nationalist government, 2011.

A review of press reports in the weeks immediately preceding and following the mid-March 2011 outbreak of riots in Daraa—usually recognized as the beginning of the uprising—offers no indication that Syria was in the grips of a revolutionary distemper, whether anti-neoliberal or otherwise. On the contrary, reporters representing Time magazine and the New York Times referred to the government as having broad support, of critics conceding that Assad was popular, and of Syrians exhibiting little interest in protest. At the same time, they described the unrest as a series of riots involving hundreds, and not thousands or tens of thousands of people, guided by a largely Islamist agenda and exhibiting a violent character.

Time magazine reported that two jihadist groups that would later play lead roles in the insurgency, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, were already in operation on the eve of the

riots, while a mere three months earlier, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood voiced “their hope for a civil revolt in Syria.” The Muslim Brothers, who had decades earlier declared a blood feud with Syria’s ruling Ba’athist Party, objecting violently to the party’s secularism, had been embroiled in a life and death struggle with secular Arab nationalists since the 1960s, and had engaged in street battles with Ba’athist partisans from the late 1940s. (In one such battle, Hafez al-Assad, the current president’s father, who himself would serve as president from 1970 to 2000, was knifed by a Muslim Brother adversary.) The Brotherhood’s leaders, beginning in 2007, met frequently with the US State Department and the US National Security Council, as well as with the US government-funded Middle East Partnership Initiative, which had taken on the overt role of funding overseas overthrow organizations—a task the CIA had previously done covertly.

Washington had conspired to purge Arab nationalist influence from Syria as early as the mid-1950s, when Kermit Roosevelt, who engineered the overthrow of Iran’s prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh for nationalizing his country’s oil industry, plotted with British intelligence to stir up the Muslim Brothers to overthrow a triumvirate of Arab nationalist and communist leaders in Damascus who Washington and London perceived as threatening Western economic interests in the Middle East.

Washington funnelled arms to Brotherhood mujahedeen in the 1980s to wage urban guerrilla warfare against Hafez al-Assad, who hardliners in Washington called an “Arab communist.” His son, Bashar, continued the Arab nationalists’ commitment to unity (of the Arab nation), independence, and (Arab) socialism. These goals guided the Syrian state—as they had done the Arab nationalist states of Libya under Muammar Gaddafi and Iraq under Saddam. All three states were targeted by Washington for the same reason: their Arab nationalist commitments clashed fundamentally with the US imperialist agenda of US global leadership.

Bashar al-Assad’s refusal to renounce Arab nationalist ideology dismayed Washington, which complained about his socialism, the third part of the Ba’athists’ holy trinity of values. Plans to oust Assad—based in part on his failure to embrace Washington’s neo-liberalism—were already in preparation in Washington by 2003, if not earlier. If Assad was championing neo-liberalism, as Draitser and others contend, it somehow escaped the notice of Washington and Wall Street, which complained about “socialist” Syria and the country’s decidedly anti-neoliberal economic policies.

#### A Death Feud Heats Up With US Assistance

In late January 2011, a page was created on Facebook called The Syrian Revolution 2011. It announced that a “Day of Rage” would be held on February 4 and 5. [1] The protests “fizzled,” reported Time. The Day of Rage amounted to a Day of Indifference. Moreover, the connection to Syria was tenuous. Most of the chants shouted by the few protesters who attended were about Libya, demanding that Muammar Gaddafi—whose government was under siege by Islamist insurrectionists—step down. Plans were set for new protests on March 4 and March 5, but they too garnered little support. [2]

Time’s correspondent Rania Abouzeid attributed the failure of the protest organizers to draw significant support to the fact that most Syrians were not opposed to their government. Assad had a favorable reputation, especially among the two-thirds of the population under 30 years of age, and his government’s policies were widely supported. “Even critics concede that Assad is popular and considered close to the country’s huge youth cohort, both

emotionally, ideologically and, of course, chronologically,” Abouzeid reported, adding that unlike “the ousted pro-American leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, Assad’s hostile foreign policy toward Israel, strident support for Palestinians and the militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah are in line with popular Syrian sentiment.” Assad, in other words, had legitimacy. The Time correspondent added that Assad’s “driving himself to the Umayyad Mosque in February to take part in prayers to mark the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, and strolling through the crowded Souq Al-Hamidiyah marketplace with a low security profile” had “helped to endear him, personally, to the public.” [3]

This depiction of the Syrian president—a leader endeared to the public, ideologically in sync with popular Syrian sentiment—clashed starkly with the discourse that would emerge shortly after the eruption of violent protests in the Syrian town of Daraa less than two weeks later, and would become implanted in the discourse of US leftists, including Draitser. But on the eve of the signal Daraa events, Syria was being remarked upon for its quietude. No one “expects mass uprisings in Syria,” Abouzeid reported, “and, despite a show of dissent every now and then, very few want to participate.” [4] A Syrian youth told Time: “There is a lot of government help for the youth. They give us free books, free schools, free universities.” (Hardly the picture of the neo-liberal state Draitser paints.) She continued: “Why should there be a revolution? There’s maybe a one percent chance.” [5] The New York Times shared this view. Syria, the newspaper reported, “seemed immune to the wave of uprisings sweeping the Arab world.” [6] Syria was distemper-free.

But on March 17, there was a violent uprising in Daraa. There are conflicting accounts of who or what sparked it. Time reported that the “rebellion in Daraa was provoked by the arrest of a handful of youths for daubing a wall with anti-regime graffiti.” [7] The Independent’s Robert Fisk offered a slightly different version. He reported that “government intelligence officers beat and killed several boys who had scrawled anti-government graffiti on the walls of the city.” [8] Another account holds that the factor that sparked the uprising in Daraa that day was extreme and disproportionate use of force by Syrian security forces in response to demonstrations against the boys’ arrest. There “were some youngsters printing some graffiti on the wall, and they were imprisoned, and as their parents wanted them back, the security forces really struck back very, very tough.” [9] Another account, from the Syrian government, denies that any of this happened. Five years after the event, Assad told an interviewer that it “didn’t happen. It was only propaganda. I mean, we heard about them, we never saw those children that have been taken to prison that time. So, it was only a fallacious narrative.”[10]

But if there was disagreement about what sparked the uprising, there was little disagreement that the uprising was violent. The New York Times reported that “Protesters set fire to the ruling Ba’ath Party’s headquarters and other government buildings...and clashed with police....In addition to the party headquarters, protesters burned the town’s main courthouse and a branch of the SyriaTel phone company.” [11] Time added that protesters set fire to the governor’s office, as well as to a branch office of a second cellphone company. [12] The Syrian government’s news agency, SANA, posted photographs of burning vehicles on its Web site. [13] Clearly, this wasn’t a peaceful demonstration, as it would be later depicted. Nor was it a mass uprising. Time reported that the demonstrators numbered in the hundreds, not thousands or tens of thousands. [14]

Assad reacted immediately to the Daraa ructions, announcing “a series of reforms, including a salary increase for public workers, greater freedom for the news media and political parties, and a reconsideration of the emergency rule,” [15] a war-time restriction on political

and civil liberties, invoked because Syria was officially at war with Israel. Before the end of April, the government would rescind “the country’s 48-year-old emergency law” and abolish “the Supreme State Security Court.” [16]

Why did the government make these concessions? Because that’s what the Daraa protesters demanded. Protesters “gathered in and around Omari mosque in Daraa, chanting their demands: the release of all political prisoners...the abolition of Syria’s 48-year emergency law; more freedoms; and an end to pervasive corruption.” [17] These demands were consistent with the call, articulated in early February on The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page “to end the state of emergency in Syria and end corruption.” [18] A demand to release all political prisoners was also made in a letter signed by clerics posted on Facebook. The clerics’ demands included lifting the “state of emergency law, releasing all political detainees, halting harassment by the security forces and combating corruption.” [19] Releasing political detainees would amount to releasing jihadists, or, to use a designation current in the West, “terrorists.” The State Department had acknowledged that political Islam was the main opposition in Syria [20]; jihadists made up the principal section of oppositionists likely to be incarcerated. Clerics demanding that Damascus release all political prisoners was equal in effect to the Islamic State demanding that Washington, Paris, and London release all Islamists detained in US, French and British prisons on terrorism charges. This wasn’t a demand for jobs and greater democracy, but a demand for the release from prison of activists inspired by the goal of bringing about an Islamic state in Syria. The call to lift the emergency law, similarly, appeared to have little to do with fostering democracy and more to do with expanding the room for jihadists and their collaborators to organize opposition to the secular state.

A week after the outbreak of violence in Daraa, Time’s Rania Abouzeid reported that “there do not appear to be widespread calls for the fall of the regime or the removal of the relatively popular President.” [21] Indeed, the demands issued by the protesters and clerics had not included calls for Assad to step down. And Syrians were rallying to Assad. “There were counterdemonstrations in the capital in support of the President,” [22] reportedly far exceeding in number the hundreds of protesters who turned out in Daraa to burn buildings and cars and clash with police. [23]

By April 9—less than a month after the Daraa events—Time reported that a string of protests had broken out and that Islam was playing a prominent role in them. For anyone who was conversant with the decades-long succession of strikes, demonstrations, riots, and insurrections the Muslim Brotherhood had organized against what it deemed the “infidel” Ba’athist government, this looked like history repeating itself. The protests weren’t reaching a critical mass. On the contrary, the government continued to enjoy “the loyalty” of “a large part of the population,” reported Time. [24]

Islamists played a lead role in drafting the Damascus Declaration in the mid-2000s, which demanded regime change. [25] In 2007, the Muslim Brothers, the archetypal Sunni political Islamist movement, which inspired Al-Qaeda and its progeny, Jabhat al Nusra and Islamic State, teamed up with a former Syrian vice-president to found the National Salvation Front. The front met frequently with the US State Department and the US National Security Council, as well as with the US government-funded Middle East Partnership Initiative, [26] which did openly what the CIA once did covertly, namely, funnel money and expertise to fifth columnists in countries whose governments Washington opposed.

By 2009, just two years before the eruption of unrest throughout the Arab world, the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood denounced the Arab nationalist government of Bashar al-Assad as a foreign and hostile element in Syrian society which needed to be eliminated. According to the group's thinking, the Alawite community, to which Assad belonged, and which the Brothers regarded as heretics, used secular Arab nationalism as a cover to furtively advance a sectarian agenda to destroy Syria from within by oppressing "true" (i.e., Sunni) Muslims. In the name of Islam, the heretical regime would have to be overthrown. [27]

A mere three months before the 2011 outbreak of violence in Syria, scholar Liad Porat wrote a brief for the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, based at Brandeis University. "The movement's leaders," the scholar concluded, "continue to voice their hope for a civil revolt in Syria, wherein 'the Syrian people will perform its duty and liberate Syria from the tyrannical and corrupt regime.'" The Brotherhood stressed that it was engaged in a fight to the death with the secular Arab nationalist government of Bashar al-Assad. A political accommodation with the government was impossible because its leaders were not part of the Sunni Muslim Syrian nation. Membership in the Syrian nation was limited to true Muslims, the Brothers contended, and not Alawite heretics who embraced such foreign un-Islamic creeds as secular Arab nationalism. [28]

That the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood played a key role in the uprising that erupted three months later was confirmed in 2012 by the US Defense Intelligence Agency. A leaked report from the agency said that the insurgency was sectarian and led by the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forerunner of Islamic State. The report went on to say that the insurgents were supported by the West, Arab Gulf oil monarchies and Turkey. The analysis correctly predicted the establishment of a "Salafist principality," an Islamic state, in Eastern Syria, noting that this was desired by the insurgency's foreign backers, who wanted to see the secular Arab nationalists isolated and cut-off from Iran. [29]

Documents prepared by US Congress researchers in 2005 revealed that the US government was actively weighing regime change in Syria long before the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, challenging the view that US support for the Syrian rebels was based on allegiance to a "democratic uprising" and showing that it was simply an extension of a long-standing policy of seeking to topple the government in Damascus. Indeed, the researchers acknowledged that the US government's motivation to overthrow the secular Arab nationalist government in Damascus was unrelated to democracy promotion in the Middle East. In point of fact, they noted that Washington's preference was for secular dictatorships (Egypt) and monarchies (Jordan and Saudi Arabia.) The impetus for pursuing regime change, according to the researchers, was a desire to sweep away an impediment to the achievement of US goals in the Middle East related to strengthening Israel, consolidating US domination of Iraq, and fostering open market, free enterprise economies. Democracy was never a consideration. [30] If Assad was promoting neo-liberal policies in Syria, as Draitser contends, it's difficult to understand why Washington cited Syria's refusal to embrace the US agenda of open markets and free enterprise as a reason to change Syria's government.

To underscore the point that the protests lacked broad popular support, on April 22, more than a month after the Daraa riot, the New York Times' Anthony Shadid reported that "the protests, so far, seemed to fall short of the popular upheaval of revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia." In other words, more than a month after only hundreds—and not thousands or tens of thousands—of protesters rioted in Daraa, there was no sign in Syria of a popular Arab Spring upheaval. The uprising remained a limited, prominently, Islamist affair. By contrast, there had been huge demonstrations in Damascus in support of—not against—the government, Assad remained popular, and, according to Shadid, the government

commanded the loyalty of “Christian and heterodox Muslim sects.” [31] Shadid wasn’t the only Western journalist who reported that Alawites, Ismailis, Druze and Christians were strongly backing the government. Times’ Rania Abouzeid observed that the Ba’athists “could claim the backing of Syria’s substantial minority groups.” [32]

The reality that the Syrian government commanded the loyalty of Christian and heterodox Muslim sects, as the New York Times’ Shadid reported, suggested that Syria’s religious minorities recognized something about the uprising that the Western press under-reported (and revolutionary socialists in the United States missed), namely, that it was driven by a sectarian Sunni Islamist agenda which, if brought to fruition, would have unpleasant consequences for anyone who wasn’t considered a “true” Muslim. For this reason, Alawites, Ismailis, Druze and Christians lined up with the Ba’athists who sought to bridge sectarian divisions as part of their programmatic commitment to fostering Arab unity. The slogan “Alawis to the grave and Christians to Beirut!” chanted during demonstrations in those early days” [33] only confirmed the point that the uprising was a continuation of the death feud that Sunni political Islam had vowed to wage against the secular Arab nationalist government, and was not a mass upheaval for democracy or against neo-liberalism. If indeed it was any of these things, how would we explain that a thirst for democracy and opposition to neo-liberalism were present only in the Sunni community and absent in those of religious minorities? Surely, a democratic deficit and neoliberal tyranny, if they were present at all and acted as triggers of a revolutionary upsurge, would have crossed religious lines. That Alawites, Ismailis, Druze and Christians didn’t demonstrate, and that riots were Sunni-based with Islamist content, points strongly to the insurrection, from the very beginning, representing the recrudescence of the long running Sunni jihadist campaign against Ba’athist secularism.

“From the very beginning the Assad government said it was engaged in a fight with militant Islamists.” [34] The long history of Islamist uprisings against Ba’athism prior to 2011 certainly suggested this was very likely the case, and the way in which the uprising subsequently unfolded, as an Islamist-led war against the secular state, only strengthened the view. Other evidence, both positive and negative, corroborated Assad’s contention that the Syrian state was under attack by jihadists (just as it had been many other times in the past.) The negative evidence, that the uprising wasn’t a popular upheaval against an unpopular government, was inherited in Western media reports which showed that Syria’s Arab nationalist government was popular and commanded the loyalty of the population.

By contrast, anti-government demonstrations, riots and protests were small-scale, attracting far fewer people than did a mass demonstration in Damascus in support of the government, and certainly not on the order of the popular upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia. What’s more, the protesters’ demands centered on the release of political prisoners (mainly jihadists) and the lifting of war-time restrictions on the expression of political dissent, not calls for Assad to step down or change the government’s economic policies. The positive evidence came from Western news media accounts which showed that Islam played a prominent role in the riots. Also, while it was widely believed that armed Islamist groups only entered the fray subsequent to the initial spring 2011 riots—and in doing so “hijacked” a “popular uprising”—in point of fact, two jihadist groups which played a prominent role in the post-2011 armed revolt against secular Arab nationalism, Ahrar- al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, were both active at the beginning of 2011. Ahrar al-Sham “started working on forming brigades...well before mid-March, 2011, when the” Daraa riot occurred, according to Time. [35] Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, “was unknown until late January 2012, when it

announced its formation... [but] it was active for months before then." [36]

Another piece of evidence that is consistent with the view that militant Islam played a role in the uprisings very early on—or, at the very least, that the protests were violent from the beginning—is that “there were signs from the very start that armed groups were involved.” The journalist and author Robert Fisk recalled seeing a tape from “the very early days of the ‘rising’ showing men with pistols and Kalashnikovs in a Daraa demonstration.” He recalls another event, in May 2011, when “an Al Jazeera crew filmed armed men shooting at Syrian troops a few hundred metres from the northern border with Lebanon but the channel declined to air the footage.” [37] Even US officials, who were hostile to the Syrian government and might be expected to challenge Damascus’s view that it was embroiled in a fight with armed rebels “acknowledged that the demonstrations weren’t peaceful and that some protesters were armed.” [38] By September, Syrian authorities were reporting that they had lost more than 500 police officers and soldiers, killed by guerillas. [39] By late October, the number had more than doubled. [40] In less than a year, the uprising had gone from the burning of Ba’ath Party buildings and government officers and clashes with police, to guerrilla warfare, involving methods that would be labeled “terrorism” were they undertaken against Western targets.

Assad would later complain that:

“Everything we said in Syria at the beginning of the crisis they say later. They said it’s peaceful, we said it’s not peaceful, they’re killing – these demonstrators, that they called them peaceful demonstrators – have killed policemen. Then it became militants. They said yes, it’s militants. We said it’s militants, it’s terrorism. They said no, it’s not terrorism. Then when they say it’s terrorism, we say it’s Al Qaeda, they say no, it’s not Al Qaeda. So, whatever we said, they say later.” [41]

The “Syrian uprising,” wrote the Middle East specialist Patrick Seale, “should be seen as only the latest, if by far the most violent, episode in the long war between Islamists and Ba’athists, which dates back to the founding of the secular Ba’ath Party in the 1940s. The struggle between them is by now little short of a death-feud.” [42] “It is striking,” Seale continued, citing Aron Lund, who had written a report for the Swedish Institute of International Affairs on Syrian Jihadism, “that virtually all the members of the various armed insurgent groups are Sunni Arabs; that the fighting has been largely restricted to Sunni Arab areas only, whereas areas inhabited by Alawis, Druze or Christians have remained passive or supportive of the regime; that defections from the regime are nearly 100 per cent Sunni; that money, arms and volunteers are pouring in from Islamic states or from pro-Islamic organisations and individuals; and that religion is the insurgent movement’s most important common denominator.” [43]

Brutality as a Trigger?

Is it reasonable to believe that the use of force by the Syrian state sparked the guerrilla war which broke out soon after?

It strains belief that an over-reaction by security forces to a challenge to government authority in the Syrian town of Daraa (if indeed an over-reaction occurred) could spark a major war, involving scores of states, and mobilizing jihadists from scores of countries. A slew of discordant facts would have to be ignored to begin to give this theory even a

soupcon of credibility.

First, we would have to overlook the reality that the Assad government was popular and viewed as legitimate. A case might be made that an overbearing response by a highly unpopular government to a trivial challenge to its authority might have provided the spark that was needed to ignite a popular insurrection, but notwithstanding US president Barack Obama's insistence that Assad lacked legitimacy, there's no evidence that Syria, in March 2011, was a powder keg of popular anti-government resentment ready to explode. As Time's Rania Abouzeid reported on the eve of the Daraa riot, "Even critics concede that Assad is popular" [44] and "no one expects mass uprisings in Syria and, despite a show of dissent every now and then, very few want to participate." [45]

Second, we would have to discount the fact that the Daraa riot involved only hundreds of participants, hardly a mass uprising, and the protests that followed similarly failed to garner a critical mass, as Time's Nicholas Blanford reported.[46] Similarly, the New York Times' Anthony Shadid found no evidence that there was a popular upheaval in Syria, even more than a month after the Daraa riot.[47] What was going on, contrary to Washington-propagated rhetoric about the Arab Spring breaking out in Syria, was that jihadists were engaged in a campaign of guerilla warfare against Syrian security forces, and had, by October, taken the lives of more than a thousand police officers and soldiers.

Third, we would have to close our eyes to the fact that the US government, with its British ally, had drawn up plans in 1956 to provoke a war in Syria by enlisting the Muslim Brotherhood to instigate internal uprisings. [48] The Daraa riot and subsequent armed clashes with police and soldiers resembled the plan which regime change specialist Kermit Roosevelt had prepared. That's not to say that the CIA dusted off Roosevelt's proposal and recycled it for use in 2011; only that the plot showed that Washington and London were capable of planning a destabilization operation involving a Muslim Brotherhood-led insurrection to bring about regime change in Syria.

We would also have to ignore the events of February 1982, when the Muslim Brothers seized control of Hama, Syria's fourth largest city. Hama was the epicenter of Sunni fundamentalism in Syria, and a major base of operations for the jihadist fighters. Galvanized by a false report that Assad had been overthrown, Muslim Brothers went on a gleeful blood-soaked rampage throughout the city, attacking police stations and murdering Ba'ath Party leaders and their families, along with government officials and soldiers. In some cases, victims were decapitated [49] a practice which would be resurrected decades later by Islamic State fighters. Every Ba'athist official in Hama was murdered. [50]

The Hama events of 1982 are usually remembered in the West (if they're remembered at all), not for the atrocities carried out by the Islamists, but for the Syrian army's response, which, as would be expected of any army, involved the use of force to restore sovereign control over the territory seized by the insurrectionists. Thousands of troops were dispatched to take Hama back from the Muslim Brothers. Former US State Department official William R. Polk described the aftermath of the Syrian army assault on Hama as resembling that of the US assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, [51] (the difference, of course, being that the Syrian army was acting legitimately within its own sovereign territory while the US military was acting illegitimately as an occupying force to quell opposition to its occupation.) How many died in the Hama assault, however, remains a matter of dispute. The figures vary. "An early report in Time said that 1,000 were killed. Most observers estimated that 5,000 people died. Israeli sources and the Muslim Brotherhood"—sworn



enemies of the secular Arab nationalists who therefore had an interest in exaggerating the casualty toll—“both charged that the death toll passed 20,000.” [52] Robert Dreyfus, who has written on the West’s collaboration with political Islam, argues that Western sources deliberately exaggerated the death toll in order to demonize the Ba’athists as ruthless killers, and that the Ba’athists went along with the deception in order to intimidate the Muslim Brotherhood. [53]

As the Syrian army sorted through the rubble of Hama in the aftermath of the assault, evidence was found that foreign governments had provided Hama’s insurrectionists with money, arms, and communications equipment. Polk writes that:

“Assad saw foreign troublemakers at work among his people. This, after all, was the emotional and political legacy of colonial rule—a legacy painfully evident in most of the post-colonial world, but one that is almost unnoticed in the Western world. And the legacy is not a myth. It is a reality that, often years after events occur, we can verify with official papers. Hafez al-Assad did not need to wait for leaks of documents: his intelligence services and international journalists turned up dozens of attempts by conservative, oil-rich Arab countries, the United States, and Israel to subvert his government. Most engaged in ‘dirty tricks,’ propaganda, or infusions of money, but it was noteworthy that in the 1982 Hama uprising, more than 15,000 foreign-supplied machine guns were captured, along with prisoners including Jordanian- and CIA-trained paramilitary forces (much like the jihadists who appear so much in media accounts of 2013 Syria). And what he saw in Syria was confirmed by what he learned about Western regime-changing elsewhere. He certainly knew of the CIA attempt to murder President Nasser of Egypt and the Anglo-American overthrow of the government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh.” [54]

In his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that “the Hama massacre could be understood as, ‘The natural reaction of a modernizing politician in a relatively new nation state trying to stave off retrogressive—in this case, Islamic fundamentalists—elements aiming to undermine everything he has achieved in the way of building Syria into a 20th century secular republic. That is also why,” continued Friedman, that “if someone had been able to take an objective opinion poll in Syria after the Hama massacre, Assad’s treatment of the rebellion probably would have won substantial approval, even among Sunni Muslims.” [55]

The outbreak of a Sunni Islamist jihad against the Syrian government in the 1980s challenges the view that militant Sunni Islam in the Levant is an outcome of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the pro-Shi’a sectarian policies of the US occupation authorities. This view is historically myopic, blind to the decades-long existence of Sunni political Islam as a significant force in Levantine politics. From the moment Syria achieved formal independence from France after World War II, through the decades that followed in the 20th century, and into the next century, the main contending forces in Syria were secular Arab nationalism and political Islam. As journalist Patrick Cockburn wrote in 2016, “the Syrian armed opposition is dominated by Isis, al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.” The “only alternative to (secular Arab nationalist) rule is the Islamists.” [56] This has long been the case.

Finally, we would also have to ignore the fact that US strategists had planned since 2003, and possibly as early as 2001, to force Assad and his secular Arab nationalist ideology from power, and was funding the Syrian opposition, including Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups,

from 2005. Accordingly, Washington had been driving toward the overthrow of the Assad government with the goal of de-Ba'athifying Syria. An Islamist-led guerilla struggle against Syria's secular Arab nationalists would have unfolded, regardless of whether the Syrian government's response at Daraa was excessive or not. The game was already in play, and a pretext was being sought. Daraa provided it. Thus, the idea that the arrest of two boys in Daraa for painting anti-government graffiti on a wall could provoke a major conflict is a believable as the notion that WWI was caused by nothing more than the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

## Socialist Syria

Socialism can be defined in many ways, but if it is defined as public-ownership of the commanding heights of the economy accompanied by economic planning, then Syria under its 1973 and 2012 constitutions clearly meets the definition of socialism. However, the Syrian Arab Republic had never been a working-class socialist state, of the category Marxists would recognize. It was, instead, an Arab socialist state inspired by the goal of achieving Arab political independence and overcoming the legacy of the Arab nation's underdevelopment. The framers of the constitution saw socialism as a means to achieve national liberation and economic development. "The march toward the establishment of a socialist order," the 1973 constitution's framers wrote, is a "fundamental necessity for mobilizing the potentialities of the Arab masses in their battle with Zionism and imperialism." Marxist socialism concerned itself with the struggle between an exploiting owning class and exploited working class, while Arab socialism addressed the struggle between exploiting and exploited nations. While these two different socialisms operated at different levels of exploitation, the distinctions were of no moment for Westerners banks, corporations and major investors as they cast their gaze across the globe in pursuit of profit. Socialism was against the profit-making interests of US industrial and financial capital, whether it was aimed at ending the exploitation of the working class or overcoming the imperialist oppression of national groups.

Ba'ath socialism had long irritated Washington. The Ba'athist state had exercised considerable influence over the Syrian economy, through ownership of enterprises, subsidies to privately-owned domestic firms, limits on foreign investment, and restrictions on imports. The Ba'athists regarded these measures as necessary economic tools of a post-colonial state trying to wrest its economic life from the grips of former colonial powers and to chart a course of development free from the domination of foreign interests.

Washington's goals, however, were obviously antithetical. It didn't want Syria to nurture its industry and zealously guard its independence, but to serve the interests of the bankers and major investors who truly mattered in the United States, by opening Syrian labor to exploitation and Syria's land and natural resources to foreign ownership. Our agenda, the Obama Administration had declared in 2015, "is focused on lowering tariffs on American products, breaking down barriers to our goods and services, and setting higher standards to level the playing field for American...firms." [57] This was hardly a new agenda, but had been the agenda of US foreign policy for decades. Damascus wasn't falling into line behind a Washington that insisted that it could and would "lead the global economy." [58]

Hardliners in Washington had considered Hafez al-Assad an Arab communist, [59] and US officials considered his son, Bashar, an ideologue who couldn't bring himself to abandon the third pillar of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party's program: socialism. The US State Department complained that Syria had "failed to join an increasingly interconnected global economy,"

which is to say, had failed to turn over its state-owned enterprises to private investors, among them Wall Street financial interests. The US State Department also expressed dissatisfaction that “ideological reasons” had prevented Assad from liberalizing Syria’s economy, that “privatization of government enterprises was still not widespread,” and that the economy “remains highly controlled by the government.” [60] Clearly, Assad hadn’t learned what Washington had dubbed the “lessons of history,” namely, that “market economies, not command-and-control economies with the heavy hand of government, are the best.” [61] By drafting a constitution that mandated that the government maintain a role in guiding the economy on behalf of Syrian interests, and that the Syrian government would not make Syrians work for the interests of Western banks, corporations, and investors, Assad was asserting Syrian independence against Washington’s agenda of “opening markets and leveling the playing field for American....businesses abroad.” [62]

On top of this, Assad underscored his allegiance to socialist values against what Washington had once called the “moral imperative” of “economic freedom,” [63] by writing social rights into the constitution: security against sickness, disability and old age; access to health care; and free education at all levels. These rights would continue to be placed beyond the easy reach of legislators and politicians who could sacrifice them on the altar of creating a low-tax, foreign-investment-friendly business climate. As a further affront against Washington’s pro-business orthodoxy, the constitution committed the state to progressive taxation.

Finally, the Ba’athist leader included in his updated constitution a provision that had been introduced by his father in 1973, a step toward real, genuine democracy—a provision which decision-makers in Washington, with their myriad connections to the banking and corporate worlds, could hardly tolerate. The constitution would require that at minimum half the members of the People’s Assembly be drawn from the ranks of peasants and workers.

If Assad was a neo-liberal, he certainly was one of the world’s oddest devotees of the ideology.

Drought?

A final point on the origins of the violent uprising in 2011: Some social scientists and analysts have drawn on a study published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences to suggest that “drought played a role in the Syrian unrest.” According to this view, drought “caused crop failures that led to the migration of as many as 1.5 million people from rural to urban areas.” This, in combination with an influx of refugees from Iraq, intensified competition for scarce jobs in urban areas, making Syria a cauldron of social and economic tension ready to boil over. [64] The argument sounds reasonable, even “scientific,” but the phenomenon it seeks to explain—mass upheaval in Syria—never happened. As we’ve seen, a review of Western press coverage found no reference to mass upheaval. On the contrary, reporters who expected to find a mass upheaval were surprised that they didn’t find one. Instead, Western journalists found Syria to be surprisingly quiet. Demonstrations called by organizers of the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page fizzled. Critics conceded that Assad was popular. Reporters could find no one who believed a revolt was imminent. Even a month after the Daraa incident—which involved only hundreds of protesters, dwarfed by the tens of thousands of Syrians who demonstrated in Damascus in support of the government—the New York Times reporter on the ground, Anthony Shadid, could find no sign in Syria of the mass upheavals of Tunisia and Egypt. In early February 2011, “Omar Nashabe, a long-time Syria watcher and correspondent for the Beirut-based Arabic daily Al-Ahkbar” told Time that “Syrians may be afflicted by poverty that stalks 14%

of its population combined with an estimated 20% unemployment rate, but Assad still has his credibility.” [65]

That the government commanded popular support was affirmed when the British survey firm YouGov published a poll in late 2011 showing that 55 percent of Syrians wanted Assad to stay. The poll received almost no mention in the Western media, prompting the British journalist Jonathan Steele to ask: “Suppose a respectable opinion poll found that most Syrians are in favor of Bashar al-Assad remaining as president, would that not be major news?” Steele described the poll findings as “inconvenient facts” which were “suppressed “because Western media coverage of the events in Syria had ceased “to be fair” and had turned into “a propaganda weapon.”[66]

#### Sloganeering in Lieu of Politics and Analysis

Draitser can be faulted, not only for propagating an argument made by assertion, based on no evidence, but for substituting slogans for politics and analysis. In his October 20 Counterpunch article, Syria and the Left: Time to Break the Silence, he argues that the defining goals of Leftism ought to be the pursuit of peace and justice, as if these are two inseparable qualities, which are never in opposition. That peace and justice may, at times, be antithetical, is illustrated in the following conversation between Australian journalist Richard Carleton and Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer, novelist and revolutionary. [67]

C: ‘Why won’t your organization engage in peace talks with the Israelis?’

K: ‘You don’t mean exactly “peace talks”. You mean capitulation. Surrendering.

C: ‘Why not just talk?’

K: ‘Talk to whom?’

C: ‘Talk to the Israeli leaders.’

K: ‘That is kind of a conversation between the sword and the neck, you mean?’

C: ‘Well, if there are no swords and no guns in the room, you could still talk.’

K: ‘No. I have never seen any talk between a colonialist and a national liberation movement.’

C: ‘But despite this, why not talk?’

K: ‘Talk about what?’

C: ‘Talk about the possibility of not fighting.’

K: ‘Not fighting for what?’

C: ‘No fighting at all. No matter what for.’

K: ‘People usually fight for something. And they stop fighting for something. So you can’t even tell me why we should speak about what. Why should we talk about stopping to fight?’

C: ‘Talk to stop fighting to stop the death and the misery, the destruction and the pain.’

K: 'The misery and the destruction the pain and the death of whom?'

C: 'Of Palestinians. Of Israelis. Of Arabs.'

K: 'Of the Palestinian people who are uprooted, thrown in the camps, living in starvation, killed for twenty years and forbidden to use even the name "Palestinians"?'

C: 'They are better that way than dead though.'

K: 'Maybe to you. But to us, it's not. To us, to liberate our country, to have dignity, to have respect, to have our mere human rights is something as essential as life itself.'

To which values the US Left should devote itself when peace and justice are in conflict, Draitser doesn't say. His invocation of the slogan "peace and justice" as the desired defining mission of the US Left seems to be nothing more than an invitation for Leftists to abandon politics in favor of embarking on a mission of becoming beautiful souls, above the sordid conflicts which plague humanity—never taking a side, except that of the angels. His assertion that "no state or group has the best interests of Syrians at heart" is almost too silly to warrant comment. How would he know? One can't help but get the impression that he believes that he, and the US Left, alone among the groups and states of the world, know what's best for the "Syrian people." Which may be why he opines that the responsibility of the US Left, "is to the people of Syria," as if the people of Syria are an undifferentiated mass with uniform interests and agendas. Syrians *en masse* include both secularists and political Islamists, who have irreconcilable views of how the state ought to be organized, who have been locked in a death feud for more than half a century—one helped along, on the Islamist side, by his own government. Syrians *en masse* include those who favor integration into the US Empire, and those who are against it; those who collaborate with US imperialists and those who refuse to. In this perspective, what does it mean, to say the US Left has a responsibility to the people of Syria? Which people of Syria?

I would have thought that the responsibility of the US Left is to working people of the United States, not the people of Syria. And I would have imagined, as well, that the US Left would regard its responsibilities to include disseminating a rigorous, evidence-based political analysis of how the US economic elite uses the apparatus of the US state to advance its interests at the expense of both domestic and foreign populations. How does Washington's long war on Syria affect the working people of America? That's what Draitser ought to be talking about.

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