18-11-2020

Towards a Syrian “politics of life”

Towards a Syrian “politics of life”

Malek Rasamny

A new book by Yasser Munif conceives of the Syrian revolution and later war as nothing less than a battle for life itself against a vast state-operated machinery of death.

One of the least understood and appreciated aspects of the Syrian revolution is the extent to which it was a grassroots, deeply spontaneous phenomenon. For the most part,

analysts watching events from afar struggled to grasp this crucial fact. Like an unfamiliar melody they were unaccustomed to hearing, Western observers interpreted Syrians' radical experiments in democratic self-governance as, essentially, so much noise; the wartime chaos of an inherently violent and backwards Islamic society. As Yasser Munif writes in his new book, The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death, a "successful revolution became 'unthinkable' to Western analysts long before external forces had actually broken its back." Munif's volume joins Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami's Burning Country; Wendy Pearlman's We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled; and Yassin al-Haj Saleh's The Impossible Revolution in attempting to spread the good word, so to speak. Collectively, these authors have demonstrated that there was indeed a real revolution in Syria, and illuminated some of its internal dynamics; whether through historical narrative—as in Burning Country—or through the testimonies of refugees, as in Pearlman's work. Yet all of this is only one half of the equation.

From the outset, the Syrian revolution has been plagued not only by misinformation, or a lack of information, but by its isolation as a revolution; politically and theoretically. The Syrian revolution has not been adequately connected to other struggles, or to broader ideas of revolutionary action and post-colonial theory. It is treated as an event that exists solely on its own terms, separate from previous notions of how politics, power, revolution, and liberation operate. This not only prevents us from fully understanding the Syrian revolution and subsequent war, but also from adapting, modifying, and expanding our theoretical toolkit in order to then better understand historical or current

revolutionary processes that fall outside our political-conceptual paradigms.

It is precisely this inadequacy and gap within the scholarship about the Syrian revolution and war that Munif—an assistant professor of sociology at Emerson College, and a co-founder of the Global Campaign for Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution—seeks to address. The book attempts to utilize various strands of post-colonial and post-modern scholarship to analyze the Syrian revolution and Bashar al-Assad's state while, in the process, looking at how the study of the revolution might expand, problematize, or modify those selfsame concepts. He does this along two main axes: the incredible state-led violence of the Assad regime, on the one hand (which he correctly deems a "politics of death"); and, on the other, the newly-enunciated, iterative, and experimental processes of liberation that were occurring at the level of micro-politics (which he calls a "politics of life"). For Munif, the Syrian war is very much a conceptual one as well as a physical one between opposed and contradictory trajectories; a politics that is struggling to create itself every day on the personal, communal, and local levels in response to the intricacies and necessities of day-to-day life, versus the deadening ideology of a hollow pseudo-nationalism, frozen in time, imposed brutally from above.

Munif does not attempt to tell a holistic narrative by any means, but instead dissects with surgical precision five specific case studies in order to illuminate his central argument. These are the homicidal/genocidal practices of the Syrian state; urban warfare in Aleppo; state-led vs. popular nationalism(s); the politics of bread; and the story of Manbij between 2012 and 2014. The internal format of

each chapter is methodical and effective. Munif swiftly lays out the theoretical framework he will use (and in so doing challenge), then connects this framework to the relevant scholarship on Syria, furnishing the reader with the necessary historical and theoretical contexts pertaining to the subject at hand. Finally, he places said subject in the context of the Syrian revolution and war themselves, using primary sources, including research he conducted himself in Syria during the war. In this final move, Munif not only draws upon but ultimately modifies, expands, and in some cases reinvents certain notions and theories of post-colonial and/or post-modern discourse, not because he seeks to but because such revision is the inevitable and necessary by-product of bringing these ideas into dialogue with the Syrian experience.

Life and death from Damascus to Manbij

Munif begins the book with an almost-forensic autopsy of the Syrian state's politics of death (indeed the chapter is titled "Necropolitics: The Taxonomies of Death in Syria"), detailing how the Assad regime has always mobilized various forms of murder as a method of rule, whether before 2011; in response to the revolts of 2011; or throughout the subsequent war. For Munif, and for many serious students of modern-day Syria, death (and the threat of it) is not only a facet of the Syrian state but it can, in fact, be viewed as the primary terrain upon and through which the regime has constituted and continues to reconstitute itself. In this sense, understanding death as a

coercive tool of the state is an essential, if not sadly the essential, starting point in making sense of how the revolution morphed into a war, and what the primary characteristics of this so-called civil war actually comprise (i.e., unrestrained state violence).

Munif begins by speaking about the context surrounding the context; that is, the emergency laws in place in Syria since the days of the regime of Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, and in fact even prior to then. It was these laws that enabled the maintenance of a massive state apparatus of violence and death in the first place. In this regard, Munif discusses the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "state of exception," tying it to a fascinating history of the usage of "emergency laws" in Syria from the time of the French Mandate through the ascent of Hafez up until the present day. He then introduces the central theoretical framework of this chapter, based on the Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics," which Munif argues traces the essence of Agamben's "state of exception" back to its roots in the colonial periphery. However, in using Mbembe's notion to understand Syria, Munif is forced to challenge it. Whereas for Mbembe the goal of necropolitics is to use death to reduce the citizen to slavery, in Syria death (and the terror it instills) is the objective in itself. As Munif writes, "The slave provides free labor and as such must be kept alive […] Unlike the productive slave, whose life must be preserved since it is vital for the plantation economy, a Syrian citizen is not essential to the regime, and as such can be disposed of."

In this manner, Munif is able to posit the Syrian state, in its Assadist form, as a vast instrument not merely of domination or exploitation but of annihilation itself. This

theoretical maneuver is repeated consistently by Munif throughout the book, to great effect. His method is to construct a series of micro-analyses, placing various aspects of the revolution and war into different theoretical echo chambers, with pen and pad ready to observe what resonances and reverberations are then created. Again and again, Munif connects Syria to a broader understanding of revolution as the grounds upon which a politics of life attempts to both confront and simultaneously articulate itself against a politics of death.

The fifth and final chapter, “Participatory Democracy and Micropolitics in Manbij: An Unthinkable Revolution,” is based entirely on fieldwork conducted in Manbij, and provides the clearest distillation of the micropolitical processes at work during the revolution. Indeed, this is the chapter in which one sees Munif’s politics of life most clearly, in all its confusing, contradictory, and multi-faceted expression. The chapter discusses the various attempts at local government made in Manbij during the interim between the city falling outside state control in 2012 and its occupation by ISIS in 2014. It follows the revolutionary forces that initially organized against the regime in 2011 as they sprang into active political life upon the regime’s withdrawal, at which moment they established their “Revolutionary Council.” The chapter proceeds to provide an utterly fascinating account of the challenges they then faced governing the city, providing security, and holding onto popular legitimacy. It is full of incredible detail; events and characters that provide a vivid portrait of political life in Manbij during this time, and how politics actually looks in a context of revolution, war, and state collapse.

Among the most intriguing sections of this chapter concerns

the link between conceptions of justice and revolutionary legitimacy. It details how the Manbij Revolutionary Council had to contend with three different legal systems: the Syrian penal code; the Islamic sharia; and tribal customary law; not to mention the way Islamist groups like ISIS seized upon the inefficacy of the revolutionary courts to establish their own brand of harsh and swift justice, simultaneously wooing and terrifying the local population. The chapter is the shortest in the book, which is a shame because it is so rich in the kind of detail that can only be provided by first-hand research, and chock full of insights, not only into the course of the Syrian revolution and war, but into how revolutionary forces organize at the moment of total revolution; the potential pitfalls they should avoid; and the challenges they will need to overcome. In a time of radical political change and global civil unrest, the lessons of the revolutionary experience in Manbij extend well beyond Syria.

Looking beyond

If anything, and in contrast to much conventional wisdom, perhaps Munif's book should teach us that the primary division in politics is emphatically not one of formal ideology, which is largely a trap and false signifier. The mercurial ideology of the Baathist state has allowed it to portray itself as anything for anyone (right-wing or left-wing; minoritarian or Islamic; progressive or conservative; free market or socialist). In fact, this chameleon-like ideological feature, which is an asset from a political public

relations point of view, betrays a hollow and ultimately nihilistic core, with ideology no more than an empty vehicle for the most craven form of power worship. Similarly, the lack of any strong ideological core, mixed with the Islamic cultural references of many Syrians, led many outsiders in turn to miss the large-scale experiment in political, social, and indeed psychological liberation that was actually taking place during the uprising in Syria, causing them to fall back instead on a “War on Terror” rhetoric to dismiss the revolution as a geopolitical plot and Islamist insurgency from the very beginning. By reinserting the Syrian experience back into discussions of post-colonial politics and revolution, and most importantly by tracing how those conversations are then changed by Syria’s presence, Munif accomplishes something of tremendous value. He returns politics to its most essential manifestation and form; as a struggle between the spontaneous creative forces of life, on the one hand, and the leaden weight of domination and death on the other. In this sense, The Syrian Revolution is a welcome addition in helping us understand not only the current conflict in Syria, but also the political moment we are all living in, with all the potential horizons and challenges that lie ahead.

Malek Rasamny is a researcher and filmmaker based between Beirut and New York. His works include the films Spaces of Exception and Indian Winter, and the multimedia project The Native and the Refugee.