

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RURAL SYRIA: NARRATIVE, CLASS, AND CONFLICT (1970-2011)

Suriye Kırsalının Ekonomi Politigi: Anlatı, Sınıf ve atıřma (1970-2011)

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Abstract

This article employs a political economy approach to offer a narrative of the rural problem of Syria. It traces the relations of production, class formation, and power as they unfolded since 1970. The Baath takeover in 1963 ended forever the liberal era which was characterized by the dominance of the traditional landlord class. The populist Baath era can be divided into a radical period characterized by the populist transformation of the rural sector, and a Machiavellian period; partially retreated from the radical course and transformed the state agrarian policy into a regime survival tool. Then came, the neoliberal era, which aimed at liberalizing markets and restructuring production relations. The paper concludes by examining the roots of the countryside participation in the revolt engulfed Syria in 2011. It argues that the rural revolt could not be explained by the drought of 2007-2010; rather the reasons are to be sought in the state-building and development strategies chosen by the ruling regime.

Keywords:

Syria, Rural Political Economy, Arab Spring, Neoliberalism, Class Analysis

JEL Codes:

F50, Q15, O20

Özet

Bu makale, Suriye'nin kırsal sorununu anlatmak için politik ekonomi yaklaşımını kullanmaktadır. Makale, 1970'ten beri ortaya çıkan üretim, sınıf oluşumu ve iktidar ilişkilerinin izini sürmektedir. 1963'te iktidarı ele geçiren BAAS, toprak sahibi sınıfın geleneksel toprak sahibi sınıfın egemenliğiyle karakterize edilen liberal döneme son vermiştir. Popülist BAAS dönemi, kırsal kesimin popülist dönüşümü ile nitelenen radikal dönem ve devletin radikal kuldardan kısmen ayrıldığı ve tarım politikasının rejimin varoluş aracına dönüştürüldüğü Makyavelci dönem olarak ayrılabilir. Ardından piyasaları liberalleştirmeyi ve üretim ilişkilerini yeniden yapılandırmayı amaçlayan neoliberal dönem geldi. Makale, 2011'de Suriye'yi saran isyana kırsal katılımın kökenlerini inceleyerek son bulmakta ve kırsal kesim ayaklanmasının 2007-2010 arasındaki kuraklık ile açıklanamayacağını, bunun yerine nedenlerin yönetici rejimin kuruluş ve kalkınma stratejilerinde aranması gerektiğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Suriye, Kırsal Politik Ekonomi, Arap Baharı, Neoliberalizm Sınıf Analizi

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1. Introduction

Syria is located between the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean in the West and arid desert regions to the East and South. In 2009, around 45 % of the population lived in rural areas. Third of the country's land area is arable. Twenty-three percent of the cultivated land is irrigated and the rest is rain-fed. The agriculture sector is important as on average it occupied around twenty percent of the country's exports, gross domestic product, and labor force. Although non-agricultural activities increased in importance in the countryside, the agricultural sector still employs more than a third of the rural labor force, Table 1.

The countryside has been a key player in the major political changes since Syria's independence. Hence, the political development of Syria could not be understood without tracing the ebbs and flows of the rural question in the country. Yet, the rural question could not be explored in isolation of the macro development course chosen by the ruling regimes. Hence, the article employs a political economy approach to study the relations of production, reproduction, and power as they unfolded in Syria's past and present at a general level, with a focus on the countryside.

Through its post-independence history, Syria went through three political economy regimes: First, the liberal regime: At the time of independence, Syria was dominantly agricultural country. Landlords were the most prominent group both politically and economically; the system they conceived for the country was a flawed liberal democracy. Landlords and the urban bourgeoisie maintained their grip on power intermittently until the 1963 Baath Coup. The liberal regime was characterized by vast resource inequality, maintained through political power and coercion. Furthermore, it thwarted the economic development of the country by squeezing the economic resources away from a developmental state and the industrial sector. Economic and demographic pressure, and the incorporation of the rural sector in the political space; rendered the system unsustainable and opened the door for the second political economy regime.

Table 1. Ratios of Rural and Agricultural Population and Labor Force

	1960	1970s	1980s	1991	2010^^
Rural population% of total population	63	56.5	53****	50.9	46.5
Agricultural employment% of total employment	51.6	48.7**	25.4***	28.2	15.2
Agricultural wage workers% of total agriculture employment	37.2	14.1*	12†	15.9	30.2
Self-employed% of total agriculture employment	31.3	42*	45.9†	30.6	47.1
Employer% of total agriculture employment	7.7	2.8*	8.7†	14.2	4.2

Sources: Hinnebusch (1989, p. 262), Batatu (1999, p. 32), World Bank online dataset, Syrian Central bureau 2010 statistical abstract.

Notes: *1972, ** 1975, ***1983, ****1981, †1984

The second regime is populist in nature; the founders of this regime were a group of rural Baath party military officers. They imposed a radical redistribution of economic and political resources that broke with the liberal era regime. They resumed and strengthened the land reform program initiated Under Nasser's union regime (1958-1961), and accompanied the reform with the nationalization of the big private sector assets in manufacturing, finance, and trade. A

radical wing within the Baath party intended to push for further populist restructuring of the rural sector, but the recurrent power struggle inside the Baath party, which was won at the end by Hafez Assad, meant the defeat of that radical project.

While Hafiz Assad maintained many of the features of the populist regime, it transformed the agrarian policy into a regime survival tool. This policy aimed at maintaining the support of the middle stratum of landholders and agrarian entrepreneurs at the expense of the wellbeing of the majority of peasants. Although the net effect of Assad policy on peasants livelihood was positive compared to their conditions under liberal era, by the late 1980s with the adoption of neoliberal restructuring this project reached its limits in delivering upward mobility with the majority of peasants and villagers living in poverty and their offspring struggling to find decent job opportunities. Among other factors, the decline of oil and external rents in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to the consolidation of a neoliberal project that was initiated in the aftermath of a foreign exchange crisis in the mid-1980s.

The Syrian regime of the 2000s embarked on an attempt to restructure the rural sector and the whole economy on neoliberal lines. It liberalized trade and the financial sector and it did away with many of the policies of the populist era; such as reducing public subsidies on fuel, fertilizers, and the adoption a new agricultural relations law; the combination of these policies exposed the economy and the rural sector to market forces to the advantage of capital owners. These policies meant the abandonment of any pretense by the regime to represent and protect the interests of the countryside. By March 2011, for the first time since the Baath took over in 1963, the Syrian rural towns and villages became fertile soil for opposition against the authorities. Although many cities were main opposition centers in the revolt, it was the population of countryside and cities' poverty belts - many of whom are of rural origins- who provided the mass revolt with its troops and battlefield leadership. Decades of ruthless repression of progressive opposition among others, combined with the regime's policies toward the religious affairs and jihadist groups, and other domestic and regional conjectures all contributed to the rise of fundamentalist powers at the later stages of the revolt.

The paper is a study of the political economy of the countryside as it evolved since 1970, the year Hafiz Assad took over ruling the country¹. The second section is a literature review rural political economy studies done on Syria with emphasis on the countryside; the third section is an analysis of the liberal era; the third section covers the populist era; the fourth section tackles the neoliberal era. The fifth section analyzes the rural roots of the 2011 revolt.

2. Literature Review

The rural political economy approach has its theoretical foundations in the works of Marx, Engles, Kautsky, and Lenin (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010). Drawing on (Bernstein, 2006), the agrarian question could be divided into three issues: First, the structure of rural production and class formation. Second, Accumulation and surplus transfer. Third, the issue of rural politics.

¹ Ethics of research and publication were followed in this study, which does not require permission from the ethics committee and / or legal / special permission.

Among the works that covered the Syrian agrarian question; Hinnebusch (1989) examines the land reform process, cooperatives, development policy and the decision-making process, and changes in the rural social structure. Hinnebusch (1990) offers a detailed study of the changes of the rural political economy under the Baath era and the political, economic, and social ramifications of the Baathist transformation of Syria since the Baath took over in 1963 until the late 1980s. It analyzes the forces that led to the agrarian crisis in the liberal era, and sheds a light on the structure of the Baath party and how the party structured its authority in relation to the peasants, army, and bureaucracy at a theoretical level and through examining state village relation in nine Syrian villages. Hinnebusch, El-Hindi, Khaddam and Ababsa (2011), covers the changes of the new rural political economy regime since Bashar Assad became president in 2000. Batatu (1999) examines closely the power structure of the Baath rule before and under Hafiz Assad; it explores the socioeconomic roots of personnel of the leading figures of the ruling party, and the military. Batatu characterizes the Bath rule as the rise of the descendants of lesser rural notables.

Rabo (1986) follows the effects of the Syrian government's ambitious agrarian development project of the Euphrates river through the perspectives of Raqqa governorates villagers, townspeople, and public employees. Rabo's work sheds a light on the power relationship between the center-the government- and periphery under the Baath rule. Syrian historian Abdullah Hanna (1975, 1978) covers the history of the agrarian problem in Syria between 1820 and 1945; Hanna (2003) relies on oral and written historical accounts of the Syrian peasant struggle for their rights in the twentieth century before the Baath takeover in 1963.

Yasin (1979), is a narrative of the change of production relations and class formation of Modern Syria, and a critical evaluation of the consequences of the Baath agrarian reform. Khalaf (1981, 1997), conducts an ethnographic study of changes of class structure and production relation in the Northern part of Syria, and follows different life paths of generations of a prominent rural family in Raqqa governorate and shows how the different political regimes affected power relations and social mobility means in this village.

More recently, the food and agricultural Organization FAO, Sarris and Corsi (2003), conducted a thorough report that provides a detailed analysis of different aspects of the Syrian agricultural sector and its challenges. Wattenbach (2006), based on geographic, climatic, socioeconomic, and technical parameters, categorizes six distinct farming systems in Syria; the study provides a survey of the technical and economic conditions of each of the farming systems.

Ababsa (2005, 2013a, 2013b) exposes the corruption that plagued the dismantling of state farms in 2000; characterizing the process as a counterrevolution that led to reinforcing inequality and the revival of latifundia in the Northeastern region of Syria. Ababsa works also explain how the Syrian government's neoliberal policies such as cutting agricultural production subsidies worsened the humanitarian cost of the 2007-2010 drought.

3. The Rise and Fall of the Populist Regime

While the dominant political and economic elites in Syria since its independence had been of urban background, the new Baath regime took over the country in 1963 brought to

power Baathist military officers of modest rural origin and dominantly from the non-Sunni Muslim religious minorities. The new regime's popular base was mainly rural and from the peripheral areas in Syria. They expanded and reinforced the land reform initiated during the Union year with Egypt (1958-1961). The Baathist land reform resulted in confiscating around 22 percent of the cultivated land; the third of which was distributed to peasants. The new law lowered land property limits depending on the region, climate, and farming conditions. The pre-1970 Baath called for a more extensive land redistribution program, and even for the collectivization of farmlands, Hinnebusch (1990, p. 126), Batatu (1999, pp. 169-170). The new regime radical character manifested itself in 1963 reforms and accelerated in 1966. It embarked on nationalizing the large financial, industrial, and commercial enterprises, which eliminated the economic power of the established urban bourgeoisie. It amended the agricultural relation law to the advantage of the peasant. To defend peasants' rights at the local level, the party pushed for the establishment of peasant unions.

The new rulers who were from rural origins made sure that the party, the state bureaucratic apparatuses, and the army recruited the majority of their cadres from the rural areas, Batatu (1999, p. 160). Increasingly, towards the late 1960s, key power positions such as the officers' corps of the army and security forces became disproportionality dominated and recruited from the minority Alawait religious sect, Van Dam (1979, p. 51), Batatu (1999, p. 157).

Baath rule in the 1960s witnessed rounds of intense party infighting; the last round took place in the late 1960s between a radical wing headed by ex-chief of Staff Salah Jadid and a pragmatic wing headed by the defense minister Hafez Assad. Worth noting that, during this infight, Peasants General Union supported the Salah Jadid radical wing against Assad's, Batatu (1999, p. 174). In the end, Hafiz Assad managed to take over the leadership of Syria in 1970.

Taping to the foreign aid that poured to Syria from the Gulf States and combined with oil exports, the Assad regime maintained and expanded the leading role of the public sector in the economy, both as a development strategy, and a tool of political control. Hafez Assad regime followed a Machiavellian approach to Syria's political economy. His era started with state-business rapprochement, where a bigger role was given for the private sector in the economy. The regime's conciliatory position towards business evolved from a partnership between regime-groomed private compradors and the political/military elites to membership in the bourgeoisie with the rise of state bourgeoisie class, Perthes (1995, p. 113), Haddad (2012, pp. 92-100). This class which is composed of the regime- political, security, and bureaucratic- elite families who utilized their unaccountable access to power to engage in legal and illegal businesses and grab lucrative rents in trade, public contracts, and private industrial and commercial sectors. Overall, the regime policies served its class alliance whose components were 'the state bourgeoisie, the new and parts of the old commercial bourgeoisie and- as a junior partner of sorts- the wealthier part of the independent peasantry', Perthes (1995, pp. 254).

By and large, Assad's regime economic policies had a populist aspect in terms of providing basic social services, while the regime management of economic affairs prioritized its security over Syria's economic prosperity, Haddad (2002). In response to the foreign exchange crisis, a partial neoliberal restructuring in extraction and allocation of resources occurred in the mid-1980s and culminated in the 1991 investment law. During this neoliberal "reform", government spending and employment were cut, ceding larger role in investment, trade, and

production to the private sector, and by that "the regime surrendered its commitment to the public sector as the sole engine of economic development", Haddad (2012, pp. 124, 156-163).

As in similar experiments in Latin America and the Middle East, this partial liberalization did not deliver growth. Measured in constant prices, real GDP per capita of the early 1980s was not recovered until the early 2000s². The regime modes Operandi fostered, a costly and poorly managed public industrial sector ruled by patrimonialism –unlike the successfully operated state-owned enterprises in other countries, Chang (2006) - which existed side by side to a parasitic crony rentier business networks, Haddad (2012). The result was a stagnant economy, high underemployment, and rising inequality, Seale (1989, p. 317), Battatu (1999, p. 43).

Worth noticing that part of government response to the mid-1980s was seeking food self-sufficiency policy to cut crucial food imports. The state increased prices paid to farmers for the strategic crops for which the state was a monopsony. According to the annual data of the ministry of agriculture, the cost-price gap, which is the farmers' net income, became positive and significantly increased starting in 1986, but after 1995, the farmers' net income diminished and was even negative in some years³.

The government also carried out agrarian infrastructure projects financed with the rents of oil exports and Gulf States' aid it acquired for its role in the US-led coalition war on Iraq in 1991. Given the declining economic prospects in the urban economy, the country saw reverse migration from the cities to the countryside and an increase in agriculture share of GDP-reached 34% in 1992- and employment, Sarris and Corsi (2003, p. 305).

The increase in government spending on agriculture did not conceal the serious problems of the Syrian economy and poverty 'remained a fact of life in the post-reform Syrian village' Hinnebusch (1989, p. 116)⁴.

We can characterize the rural political economy regime under Hafez Assad by the following characteristics:

1. Since the late 1970s, the Syrian economy as a whole suffered from acute predicaments, to which the countryside was not immune. The failure in the structural transformation of the Syrian economy manifested itself in: a) the persistent large share of agriculture in the national economy and employment. b) weakness of industrial sector capacity to generate income and employment. c) rentier economy dependent on unsustainable geopolitical and oil rents to meet foreign exchange needs. d) Dependence on Lebanon and Gulf States labor markets to provide employment. For example, in 1992 Syrian guest workers in Lebanon were estimated to be 200,000 in 1992, rose in 1995 to be between 450,000 to 700,000, which using the World Bank data amounts to 16% of the Syrian labor force, Chalcraft (2009, p. 148).

2. There is ample evidence that land reform and equitable land redistribution contribute to the increase of agricultural productivity and income equality, Griffin, Khan and Ickowitz

² The Syrian Central Bureau 2010 abstract online data: <http://www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2010/Data-Chapter15/TAB-21-15-2010.htm>

³ Farmers were reportedly paid around 20% below the listed government price.

⁴ Utilizing Abu-Ismail, Abdel-Gadir and El-Laithy (2011) calculated rural poverty line, the agricultural ministry crops price and cost data, and the world bank consumer price index data, we find that in 1994, a family of four persons- a small family in rural standards- who is farming rain-fed crop, needed at least 6 ha to be above the poverty line. This is a concerning fact given that 66% of farmers' average holding area was at most 4 hectares

(2002). However, as Handelman (1981, p. 2) argued, for land reform to be successful, equitable land redistribution should be accompanied by “adequate prices, credit, and technical assistance.” The institutions Assad regime set for the restructuring of the agrarian political economy, while exterminating the political and economic power of the traditional urban elites, it ended up benefiting a class of rich middle peasants and agro entrepreneurs. Hafiz Assad did not respond to the farmers union demand of lower landholding limit for he did not want to go further in land reform, and by that he guaranteed the support of middle and rich peasants, Hinnebusch (1989, p. 139). Instead of an egalitarian land redistribution program, the mild Baathist land reform resulted in the control of 26 percent of all landholders of 78% of the total cultivated land, while 36% of peasants stayed landless, Hinnebusch (1990, p. 109). Ababsa (2013b), commenting on the Baath land reform program in Eastern Syria observes that a phenomenon of “disguised feudalism” emerged: the former owners, even when they had lost part of their land, remained great entrepreneurs.’ Yasin (1979), documents many instances of abuses of the implementation of land reform in the interests of agricultural investors and de facto large landowners.

Due to traditional inheritance laws, and lack of regulatory framework, Syrian agriculture was plagued by increasing fragmentation of land tenure in most regions, which resulted in decreased average area per landholder from 11.7 hectares in 1970 to 5.8 hectares in 2002, Wattenbach (2006). According to the 1994 census data, 56 percent of landholders had 2 hectares or less of cultivable land. For this group farmland income was meager and farming importance as a sole source of income declined, which led to increased diversification of livelihood. Hence, 29 percent of landholders had nonagricultural jobs as their main occupation, Sarris and Corsi (2003, p. 306). When we consider agricultural support programs of prices, subsidies, and loans, they benefitted mainly the rich peasants at the expense of the majority of peasants, Batatu (1999, pp. 53, 57-59), Sarris and Corsi (2003, pp. 304-307), Wattenbach (2006, p. 112), World Bank (2008). Finally, Assad restructured the peasant union into mainly a regime control and mobilization vehicle, Batatu (1999, p. 254).

3. Although there was an expansion of health, utilities, and education services in the countryside compared to the pre-Baath era. The disparity between urban and rural regions persisted in health, education, and human development Batatu (1999, pp. 67-74), Ghosh, Aw-Hassan and Pellett (2004).

The United Nations Development Program (2004) report on Syria economy, pointed out that after “the golden age of agriculture” in the 1960s and the 1970s, the main problems of rural poverty and agriculture could be attributed to: a) freezing the land redistribution reform that led to an increase in landless peasants and land concentration. b) Inadequate investment for labor absorption in agriculture, and the limited capacity of the nonagricultural sector to absorb the surplus labor force. c) Poor ecological management.

Overall, the qualitative changes Baath revolt brought to the countryside in improved living conditions, were worn out by the mid-1980s, as Rabo (1985) observed: ‘Most local people dreamt of a booming agriculture, an expanding economy, and increased social openness. Instead, they got soil salinity, inflation, and increased local stratification’. Sarris (2001) survey of 100 households from five representative villages in Syria found that 47% did not think their income was sufficient for the bare life necessities; while 37% found their income sufficient only for bare life necessities.

Even before Bashar Assad's regime adopted neoliberal policies, and the harsh drought hit Syria in the late 2000s, a considerable segment of the rural population has been suffering from meager living conditions and dire employment prospects.

4. Bashar Assad: The Consolidation of Neoliberalism

After the façade parliament reduced the constitutional age of the presidency from 40 to 34, the groomed heir took over ruling the country after the death of his father in June 2000. Bashar Assad regime inherited a country with a stagnant economy and mounting problems.

Oil rent which had been around 20% of GDP since 1989, reach a peak of 600 thousand barrels a day in 1996 and declined since then to 387 thousand in 2010. While oil revenues were 40-50 percent of total government revenues in the early 2000s, it was projected that by 2011 Syria will become a net importer of oil due to a decline in oil production and an increase in domestic consumption, International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2005).

Besides decreasing oil rent, there had a drain in the foreign aid from the Gulf States which financed the developmental projects of the regime in different episodes in the 1970s⁵, 1980s, 1990s, Perthes (1995, pp. 31, 33-36). This meant the demise of geopolitical and oil rents, which had been reflating the economy and government expenditures, and concealing for the predatory aspects of the regime. Another serious challenge for the regime was providing jobs for the bulge of new entrants to the job market projected to increase at a 4 percent a year that came after decades of high population growth IMF (2005).

To stabilize his rule, for the first three years, Bashar Assad reversed the austerity program implemented since 1985 and expanded government social spending and public sector salaries, IMF (2005).

Then, through the rest of the 2000s, the regime followed the policy recommendations of the IMF Syria Consultation Reports, IMF (2005, 2008, 2009). The Baath party 2005 conference solidified the neoliberal switch by officially abandoning the socialist character of the economy and replacing it with the label of the social market economy, meanwhile, the adopted neoliberal restructuring showed that there was not much of "social" in the new order.

The regime promulgated new laws in the areas of taxation, agriculture, labor, and real estate that diminished protection for the impoverished and favored capital over labor, Dahi and Munif (2012), Seifan (2010). The government embarked on liberalizing trade and finance sectors and signed free trade agreements signed with Turkey and the Arab world, which lowered trade barriers and eased the movement of goods. Furthermore, Fiscal consolidation was implemented as government spending on health and education decreased from 8.93% of GDP in 2003 to 6.72% in 2009, (World Bank), in addition to cutting fuel and agricultural subsidies.

The government succeeded in cutting the budget deficit while the economic growth of the 2000s was relatively impressive, averaging annually 4.5%. However, growth was mostly concentrated in the services sector -whose share in the GDP increased by 10% for the (2000-2010) period- rather than in the productive sectors of manufacturing and agricultural, IMF (2009). Furthermore, the economic policies failed in generating sufficient job opportunities,

⁵ For example, during the 1970s around 65 percent of investment and 80 percent of public investment was financed from external resources, Perthes (1995, p. 31).

leading to high youth unemployment – officially at 20% in 2010-, and a decline of the labor-force participation rate from 53.0% to 42.7% for the years 2001 and 2010 respectively. For the male labor-force participation rate, the decline was from 83.3% to 72.2%, which is significant given the high population growth rate in recent decades. This lack of domestic job opportunities made Syria dependent on the neighboring countries' labor markets, with the number of Syrians working outside of the country in 2003 estimated at 1.9 million, Al-Khouri (2004, p. 27), around 37% of the Syrian labor force.

The hasty implementation of the trade agreements with Turkey and the Arab countries while benefitting competitive industrial enterprises, it had ruinous effects on many small enterprises in the sectors of textile, engineering and chemical industries, with many businessmen switching from manufacturing to trade, Laham (2011).

The growth experience of the 2000s was anti-poor; as indicated in the 2005 and 2009 official reports of the government planning committee, the economic reform program led to an increase of income inequality, and a decline in wage share and real wages (5)⁶. The 2008 official survey of Family Expenses shows that the top quintile income bracket of households spent around 40% of total private consumption, while the lowest quintile spent only 9%.

The state further withdrew from its social commitments meanwhile the new regime's class alliance abandoned its rural popular base and expanded its partnership with the new bourgeoisie. The share of the private sector in gross fixed capital formation increased from 36% to 57% between the years 2000 and 2010. Based on Haddad (2012, p. 64), we can distinguish three groups in the business community: a) State bourgeoisie who are descendants of the men of the regime itself, such as the cousins of Assad, the sons of the vice president, the defense minister, and the head of the Syrian military intelligence among others. b) Partner bourgeoisie who are allied and have a close relationship with the elite members of the regime. c) The old bourgeoisie and independent businesspeople who maintained a relative distance from the regime and whose wealth and assets are relatively smaller than the other two groups.

Under the new regime, the emerging dominant business networks were narrower and undermined some of the actors of the old networks. The decline of government rents of oil and foreign aid directed these elites to the private sector. We observe 'the emergence and the gradual "takeover" of increasingly larger sectors and portions of the economy by regime loyalists', Haddad (2012, p. 106). Armed with their organic ties to the regime, Rami Makhoulf alike businessmen competed to demarcate their niche of spoils within different sectors of the economy. Moreover, businessmen were now allowed to organize and establish their own semi-independent business associations. They operated in a friendlier business environment that was increasingly liberalized, though it was 'ultimately constrained by political elites', Haddad (2012, p. 104, 106).

Furthermore, most of the private investment growth achieved in that period was not directed towards productive sectors such as manufacturing, rather towards services and real estate. During the neoliberal period (1985-2010), gross investment average was 21% of GDP,

⁶ For 2005 report: An analysis of Macroeconomy; The Syrian Planning Committee report www.planning.gov.sy/SD08/msf/macro_analysis.pdf accessed later as https://web.archive.org/web/20170101013114/www.planning.gov.sy/SD08/msf/macro_analysis.pdf For 2009 report the source is the official Newspaper Al-Thawara report https://thawra.sy/_archive.asp?FileName=41227927920091025000434

10% below the level of investment of the late 1970s when the public sector was the leading locomotive of the economy, Matar (2016, pp. 120-128). As a result, Syria failed to build a developmental state that could nurture internationally competitive private sector capable of generating employment and economic growth and complement the state's developmental efforts, Chang (1993).

The withdrawal from the regime's social commitments is best captured by its approach to the agrarian sector. The first step of the neoliberal restructuring was manifested in the de facto privatization of the state farms in the Euphrates project by executive order in 2000. Dismantling state farms could have been justified based on their losses and mismanagement, and if the land reallocation was in the interests of the local small peasants. However, the privatization of the state farms was criticized for its regressive consequences, Ababsa (2013a).

Furthermore, a new agricultural relation law promulgated in 2004 and implemented in 2007. The 1958 law intended to stop the arbitrary expulsion of peasants from the sharecropping land without compensation by the landowners and banned peasants expulsion unless the landlord can give evidence of negligence by the sharecropper. The new law announced sharecropping agreements as invalid unless written and gave more rights to the landlord to terminate the contract with the sharecropper. Many sharecropping arrangements have been inherited for years through generations without a written contract. One example of the direct consequence of the 2004 law was the expulsion of peasants in the coastal area near Banyas from the land they farmed for years, and built their houses and dug wells. It took the turmoil starting in 2011 for Assad to amend the law in April 2011 to allow the peasants to provide evidence of an oral contract, although the amendments did not touch the right of the landowners to expel the sharecropper if they wish so, (Ababsa, 2013b).

As a part of the fiscal consolidation program, the eyes were on agricultural subsidies a remnant of the populist agrarian policies, which cost the Syrian treasury around 4% of GDP in 2007, the World Bank (2008). The government started in 2008 to cut drastically agricultural subsidies of fuel, fodder, and fertilizer, and tightened loan conditions of the public agrarian bank. This resulted in hiking the cost of farming and transportation in the middle of the drought, putting farmers under insurmountable hardship, De Châtel (2014a).

The drought that took place in the years 2007-2010 came with devastating consequences especially in the eastern parts of Syria where rain-fed crops in the governorates of Al-Hasaka and Ar-Raqqa were eliminated in 2008, while sheep livestock declined by 32% between 2007 and 2010. Furthermore, the cut in subsidies led to a decline in irrigated crops in some governorates too. According to the United Nations report the drought-affected 1.3 million inhabitants, 800,000 of them were severely affected, 80% of which were living on a diet of bread and sugared tea. Over 95% of those affected lived in the North Eastern governorates of Ar-Raqqa, Deir Ezzour, and Al-Hasaka. The drought and economic pressures caused 60 thousand families to migrate from their homes in the northeastern parts of Syria to other regions and cities, UN-OCHA (2010).

The drought came in the aftermath of decades of poor public management and unsustainable utilization of ecological resources which resulted in serious degradation of water and soil, undoing the significant gains in agricultural productivity and food policy that had been achieved in the 1970s and 1980s, Aw-Hassan, Rida, Telleria and Bruggeman (2014), De Châtel (2014a, 2014b), Hole (2009), World Bank (2008, p. 50).

Though the provision of basic public social services was relatively maintained, even before the drought rural income was regressing, as the growth of per capita expenditures of rural Syrians was (-0.3%) between 1996 and 2007, Abu-Ismael, Abdel-Gadir and El-Laithy (2011). The combination of the drought, neoliberal policies, and mismanagement of natural resources undermined living conditions in the countryside. The percentage of rural employment in agriculture dropped from 37% in 2006 to 21% in 2010, while the rural labor-force participation rate decreased drastically from 62.6% in 2002 to 42.4% in 2010. Furthermore, there was a rising proletarianization of peasants reflected in increased wage workers' share of agricultural sector employment from 12% in 2002 to 30% in 2010.

Cutting the subsidies during the drought was a glaring example of the exclusion of the rural constituency from the new ruling class alliance. A policy that was neither politically prudent nor economically justified. The subsidies cut took place while the economy was achieving relatively high GDP growth rates, manageable budget deficits, and an external position with comfortable foreign reserves and rising foreign direct investment inflow, IMF (2009, pp. 18-21, 40).

5. Why Did the Countryside Revolt in 2011?

A main popular legitimacy of the Baath regime was representing and improving the living conditions of the rural areas, where the regime's strongmen descended. The Assad regime could count on its rural base in the countryside when the cities were centers of opposition in different episodes in 1960, the 1970s, and early 1980s. "It is no coincidence that the countryside was a breeding ground for anti-government hostility before 1963 has, under the Ba'th, proven little receptive to anti-regime activism, even as the cities have become hotbeds of dissidence", Hinnebusch (1989, pp. 218, 202). In the 2011 revolt against the Assad regime, there was a change in this attitude towards the regime. While the revolt had an obvious urban facet, as seen in the insurrecting cities of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs among others, the rural towns and villages were the core centers of the opposition, with its youth staffing the prominent militant factions and the leadership of these factions.

There has been an intense debate about the reasons for this change in the countryside attitude towards the regime. Some scholars such as Werrell, Femia and Sternberg (2015) attribute the revolt to the economic suffering caused by food and environmental insecurities, which were worsened by climate change and natural resources mismanagement. Accordingly, drought and the resulting migration and demographic pressure is the main catalyst of the revolt. Others though recognize a role for the drought, emphasize the long history of resources mismanagement and the role the neoliberal policies of Bashar Assad regime in the discontent of the farmers and the countryside, De Châtel (2014a). Selby, Dahi, Fröhlich and Hulme (2017), examining migration patterns during the drought and the rain precipitation level in Syria; question the link between the drought and the uprising. Their data shows that the drought did not hit equally all of the Syrian regions. 'the sudden removal of fuel and fertilizer subsidies in 2008 and 2009 must have had greater immediate impacts on farmer livelihoods and migration than the drought.' Fröhlich (2016) reinforces this view as interviews with refugees from Dara'a governorate – the cradle of the revolt- debunk the argument of the role of migrants from the drought-stricken Northeastern parts of Syria in the uprising in Dara'a.

Although the drought of 2007-2010 was severe, the geographical distribution of agricultural production decline during the drought does not correspond to the regional intensity of the revolt nor does the relative role of agriculture in the rural livelihood confirm the drought-revolt thesis. Furthermore, the deterioration of the economic prospects of the rural population has been in process at least since the mid-1990s.

When we examine agricultural production in the years of drought relative to 2004 production -an average production level for the period before the drought. In Daraa, we find that among the four years of the drought 2007-2010 agricultural production decreased marginally only in 2008 to recover in 2009 and 2010, Table 2. The same applied to other rural opposition heartlands such as the countryside of Aleppo and Idleb. Aleppo witnessed production decline only in 2008, while in Idleb the decline was moderate and only for 2007 and 2008 to be followed by a recovery in 2009 and 2010, Table 2.

Furthermore, in the countryside of Damascus -a core area of the revolt- although it was affected by the drought, its economy was quite diversified with only 13 percent of its rural labor force working in agriculture in 2006, Figure 1.

As an alternative to the flawed and simplistic drought-revolt thesis, the paper argues for the adoption of the model of contentious politics of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) in analyzing the rural revolt. Drawing on the dynamic mobilization model, there are three crucial factors in the making of an uprising. First: perceived threat and opportunity. The regime's neoliberal policies and its mismanagement of the economy combined with brutal political repression had been long perceived as a threat to the interests of the majority of Syrians, George (2003). More importantly and timely was the perceived opportunity that the Arab Spring and the international military intervention in Libya gave to changing the status quo. Tunisia and Egypt showed that it is possible to bring down long-standing dictators in the Arab World; while international diplomatic positions and the 2011 air campaign against Gaddafi forces marching on revolting Benghazi, gave a misleading message that mass murder by dictators will not be internationally tolerated anymore.

Second: The capacity of the opponents to attract sufficient numbers and resources to provide a social and organizational base for innovative collective action. Social media outlets and satellite channels such as Aljazeera were tools for organization and mobilization that enabled the opponents of circumventing effective state control and censorship of communication, Howard et al. (2011), and complemented organic societal informal networks in mobilizing the masses, Leenders and Heydemann (2012).

Table 2. Agricultural Production Growth for Selected Years by Governorate in Million Tones Unit

Governor ate	2010- 2004	2010- 2004	2009- 2004	2009- 2004	2008- 2004	2008- 2004	2007- 2004	2007- 2004
	non-irr % differen ce	irr% differen ce	non-irr % differen ce	irr % differen ce	non-irr % differen ce	irr % differen ce	non-irr % differen ce	irr % differen ce
Sweida	9.48	-22.61	21.97	-18.55	-13.42	-25.91	-14.60	-14.60
Dar'a	19.38	11.27	25.03	16.92	-46.33	6.37	-19.05	2.59
Quneitra	2.80	47.95	59.13	51.48	7.23	62.86	87.47	216.98
Damascus	-14.59	-21.35	-5.88	-10.71	-17.20	-21.12	30.34	4.34
Homs	0.26	-15.36	-4.69	-5.70	-44.10	-16.96	-37.52	-2.68
Hama	-46.24	-4.40	48.82	-7.93	-50.58	-14.64	-10.18	1.29
Ghab	-39.77	-6.84	5.72	-9.75	-34.22	-11.45	-0.34	1.92
Idleb	-4.90	24.76	7.03	20.06	-36.84	17.06	-30.81	5.93
Tartous	-36.93	-5.05	-53.04	-3.19	-20.75	-9.52	-66.04	-15.79
Lattakia	-15.33	27.42	-49.15	32.26	-9.25	30.13	-62.10	17.99
Aleppo	-2.66	12.60	3.30	21.03	-49.11	1.23	-3.92	12.34
Al-Raqqa	-60.10	-5.02	-97.37	5.62	-99.87	-5.78	-80.40	20.38
Dair- Ezzor	-	-10.98	-	-4.09	-	-14.64	-	17.69
Al- Hassake	-38.27	-47.41	-71.00	-24.50	-99.99	-48.71	-11.60	-20.00

Notes: *2004 chosen because it was the year production around average annual agricultural production of the recent years before the drought (2007-2010).

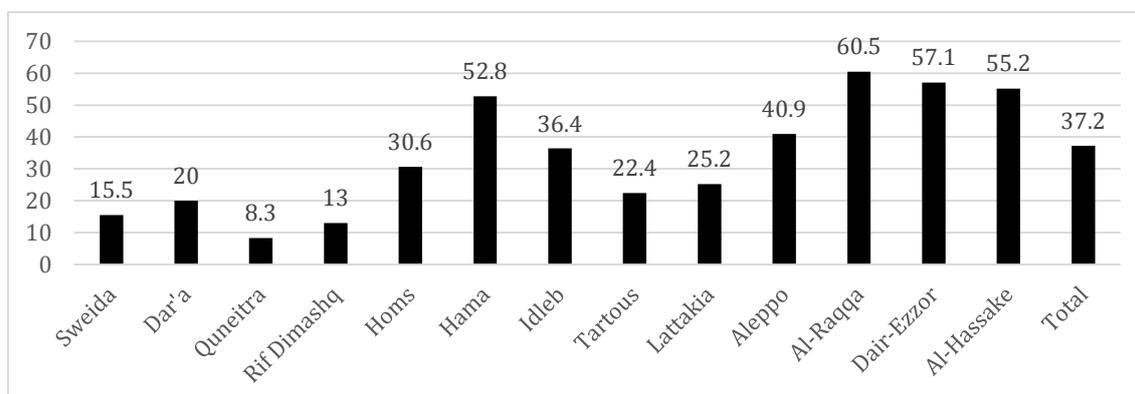


Figure 1: Ratio of Rural Labor Force Who Works in Agricultural Occupations (2006)⁷

Third: The reconceptualization of the function of established social relations and entities. As the slogans of the protesters against the regime reflected new expectations of the ruled from the rulers. They demanded dignity, freedom, and reclamation of their rights and public space from the monopoly of the ruling elite.

Drawing on Moore (1966), the brutal response of the regime to the protests, and lack of opposition leadership from either the bourgeoisie– the French revolution route-, or progressive

⁷ In some governorates urban labor force worked in agricultural occupations at a significant percentage (Daraa:17.4, Raqa: 12%, Dier Ezzour 15.2, Hasaka 9.2)

intelligentsia – the Chinese revolution route- led to the rise of reactionary militant forces among the fragmented opposition in the later stages of revolt.

While the Syrian bourgeoisie was too weak and penetrated by the regime strongmen to take a leadership role of the revolt, decades of brutal repression -of leftist opposition among others- thwarted the emergence of a capable progressive movement like the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT).

Political repression combined with post-1980s conciliatory attitude to the religious establishment, Pierret (2013, pp. 70-71, 197-199); the regime manipulative relations with jihadist factions and the entanglement of the lingering revolt with regional financial and jihadist networks, Lister (2016, pp. 31, 53), Pierre (2018), all fostered the conditions for reactionary forces to play a significant role in the revolt after the first year.

As a result, the Syrian countryside, once the popular base of the regime, became the main provider of manpower and leadership of the opposition prominent military factions such as Jaysh al-Islam from Damascus countryside, Al-Tawhid Brigade from Aleppo countryside, and Ahrar al-Sham from Idlib countryside.

6. Conclusion

We cannot understand the rural problem in Syria in isolation of the country's development course. This could be framed in terms of Peter Evans (1995) embedded autonomy thesis. The Syrian state under the Assads started as a highly autonomist statist regime (1970-1985), in which the economy was led by massive public sector enterprises that were poorly managed, and failed to deliver decent jobs, growth, and exports. Then the state morphed into predatory regime (1986-2010), in which state bourgeoisie – businessmen organically tied to the regime ruling elite- dominated many of the commanding heights of the private sector.

Through the history of Syria, the countryside moved from being politically the periphery in the liberal era, to be the center in the populist era, and then back to be a political periphery during the neoliberal transition. The failure of the Baath regime in successfully transforming the economy into a productive one meant the persistence of the rural problem alongside the expansion of poor informal urban settlements around the cities⁸.

Besides the economic policy failure, the Assads' state-building strategy prioritized the regime's security; focused on eliminating any potential political alternatives, and deprived the country of institutions that could safeguard social cohesion in times of turmoil. The strategy's sectarian aspects mobilized and inflamed primordial identities, while it purged Syrian society from any civil associations save those of ethnic and religious character, Van Dam (1979, p. 20), Phillips (2015). All these political economic and social factors put the Syrian state and society in the explosive path it took since 2011.

⁸ According to Syrian Bureau of Statistics report, 30-40% of population in the biggest cities lived in informal settlements. Majority of which were built in the decade before the revolt and populated by the poor according to the minister of Local Administration 2010 interview. <http://esyria.sy/sites/code/index.php?site=damascus&p=stories&category=publicvoice&filename=201005171530011>

In examining the roots of the revolt, agricultural production levels, and rural employment during the drought period shows the weakness of the drought-revolt thesis. To uncover the underlying reasons for the rural revolt our focus should be on the regime state-building and development policies.

Researchers' Contribution Rate Statement

I am a single author of this paper. My contribution is 100%.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no potential conflict of interest in this study.

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