

Syria: Making the Case for a “Politics of Life”

Friday 11 February 2022, by [ETZBACH Harald](#), [MUNIF Yasser](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2022).

Yasser Munif on the lessons of the Syrian revolution and beyond

Harald Etzbach spoke with Yasser Munif about the theoretical and methodological approaches of his book *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*, the limitations of geopolitical thinking, and the prospects for democratic revolutionary movements in Syria and the region.

What was your motivation for writing this book? What is your relationship with Syria?

The Syrian revolution is one of the cataclysmic events in the region in recent history and as such it is impossible to ignore it. In addition, I grew up in a very political household. My father, who was a fiction writer from the Arabian Peninsula, [1] wrote extensively about dictatorship and Arab prisons. I spent many years in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. So Arab dictatorship deeply impacted me.

Many people in my generation saw the Arab revolts as a unique opportunity to topple dictatorship. Prior to 2011 we dreamt about democracy in Syria without really believing it will ever happen. When Tunisian and Egyptian toppled their dictators, many of us began preparing and organizing for a rebellion in Syria. The book is an attempt to understand what happened in the past decade. It proposes theoretical tools to analyze the violence of the regime and the revolutionary process.

Your book is not a chronology of the Syrian revolution (as one might expect from the title), but approaches the phenomenon from five different perspectives (necropolitics, the geography of death in Aleppo, nation against state, the politics of bread, micropolitics in Manbij). Why did you choose this structure?

A lot was written about the history and periodization of the Syrian revolution. Many excellent books examine events in a chronological fashion. I was interested in analyzing the revolt from different perspectives.

One of them is the question of space. I am interested in how urban space can impact the social and the political – especially in times of war. We need to understand how the Syrian regime weaponized topography and urbanism to crush the rebellion. Another essential question is how to analyze the modalities of death: how to understand death try to make sense of a phenomenon that seems chaotic or nihilistic.

The book is about experimenting with social theory and trying to understand new phenomena in the Arab region using various conceptual tools. These are not necessarily the only entry points to the Syrian revolution, but they could be useful to unpack complex processes.

Your book is also a critique of geopolitical thinking. In the subtitle of your book, you even oppose “politics of life” and “geopolitics of death”. What does this dichotomy mean?

Part of the argument I make in this book is methodological and theoretical. I argue that some

scholars deploy certain methodologies uncritically to analyze the cartography of the revolts in the Arab World. Some of these methodologies were initially developed in a Western context to examine Western movements. Obviously, some of these methodologies are inadequate to analyze the emergent politics in the Arab region.

The book proposes a heuristic approach to examine the Syrian revolt. For example, the New Social Movement (NSM) theory was developed in the West to understand Western processes. NSM assumes that people have a political space in which they operate. It assumes that there is an organic relationship between the state and citizens. The theoretical foundation of NSM makes it inadequate for non-Western contexts such as Syria. Using NSM without interrogating its history and origins skews any political analysis of the revolt.

In my view, the “politics of life” and the “politics of death” are more adequate conceptual tools to examine the Syrian uprising. They help us avoid the pitfalls of certain Western theories. Some of these theories, like New Social Movement theory, international relations, and geopolitics, might shed light on some features of the revolution, but they prevent us from comprehending other central aspects. The whole geopolitical approach presupposes the state as a unit of analysis and prevents the examinations of levels beneath or above the state.

Grassroots movements, for example, do not speak that language (i.e. geopolitics), and they operate at a different level. So if we use a geopolitical lens it is impossible to see grassroots movements. Grassroots politics become instantly invisible despite the good intentions of the researcher.

A segment of the international Left is guilty of the same mistakes. By prioritizing a geopolitical reading (the politics from above) of the Syrian revolt, the international Left participated in isolating the Syrian revolution and invisibilized the politics from below.

But geopolitics does exist. International actors (states) act according to geopolitical considerations. Revolutionary movements are confronted with this. Some of the Syrian revolutionaries were very naïve in this regard, for example, in their trust in the policies of the United States or Turkey.

Of course, macropolitical forces, international relations, and geopolitics do exist, and they are extremely powerful. It is in fact the dominant form of politics prior to the revolt.

The revolt unleashed forces/actors who don't abide by the rules of geopolitics or international relations. They escape the hegemonic matrix (geopolitics/international relations/international law), and the role of the researcher is to provide theoretical frameworks that highlight local struggles. The revolution is by definition the moment when grassroots forces escape the dominant logic and establish a new one. The role of the state and international actors is to recapture them and force the hegemonic logic on them.

Again, I am not dismissing geopolitics (or what I call “the politics of death”), I am simply opposing the “politics of life” to it. What I am advocating for is another way of thinking about politics — it is about putting social movements from below in conversation with geopolitics, in the methodological sense. We cannot understand what is happening in Syria simply by looking at the situation from above. We have also to develop an understanding of politics that emanates from below.

The social sciences are not only a framework to understand a phenomenon, they often have material implications outside academia. When researchers prioritize the geopolitical reading at the expense of the politics from below, or what I am calling the politics of life, then grassroots struggles are invisibilized. By constantly imposing the geopolitical analytics, the scholar participates in silencing

revolutionary forces and in making their revolution unthinkable.

My point is that there is a relationship, an organic linkage between research and facts on the ground. Writing about Syria is not a neutral endeavour: academia is an extension of the battlefield. Simply put, the book proposes a politics from below on the epistemological and methodological levels. It aspires to provide theoretical tools that further the politics from below.

In the first chapter you develop the concept of “necropolitics” and in the second chapter you analyze the “geography of death” in Aleppo. Death seems to be fundamentally inscribed in the rule of the Assad regime. Could you explain these concepts and their meaning in relation to Syria?

I use the concept of “politics of death” to signal that death has become an instrument of governance in Syria. Individuals are under constant threat of being disappeared, tortured, or killed. The Syrian regime developed an entire repertoire of death to crush the revolt. The lethal threat is omnipresent and people have to navigate the geography of death. The mindset of the average person living in Syria is: “How do I minimize the risks of being killed?”

I am not describing this situation in Syria to minimize the level of violence that people experience in other regions or the West. In the West, for example, there is a subtler separation between the spaces of life and the geography of death. There are certain spaces in the West where people can in fact experience a high level of violence. This is the case when migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea and are left to die by European governments. Refugees living in Calais Jungle in Northern France are under a constant threat of state violence. Black and Brown neighbourhoods in many European cities and the prison system in the United States are part of the geography of death.

The point is not that those spaces do not exist in the West, but that they are peripheral. A large segment of the population in the West is not aware of the existence of these spaces. In Syria the opposite is true: the state operates through the politics of death and by the logic of the camp.

It's important not to overgeneralize or homogenize the ongoing process in Syria. There is clearly a difference between the period preceding the uprising and the post-2011 one. It's not simply a question of the intensity of violence but also modalities of death. Why, for example, are there different intensities of death? What do uneven velocities of death achieve? What is the role of an individualized death as opposed to a collective one? I think that there is something important to investigate there. For an external observer, death, like violence, is generic and undifferentiated. One of my goals was to build a taxonomy of death in order to better understand the politics of death.

The chapter about Aleppo examines the geography of death. In what ways is space operationalized by the state to inflict the highest level of violence? How is the urban/ the city weaponized to control the population? The city becomes a toolbox for the Syrian regime to crush the rebellion. The logic is not new, since the Syrian regime had to suppress an urban rebellion in mid-1970s and early 1980s in Aleppo.

Space is reconceptualized according to vertical and horizontal logics to control the city militarily. Every space becomes part of that military mindset. Vertical structures (whether they are luxury hotels, minarets, or tall administrative buildings) are repurposed to position snipers. The regime's goal is to control the main arteries in the city. Horizontal spaces are crisscrossed by fixed checkpoints and mobile militias. In this case, the purpose of the regime is to fragment the city and to maximize the control of opposition areas. Even the topography of the city (hilltops, rivers, and parks) is rethought to create a more efficient cartography of death.

Part of the lethal power was inherited from the Ottomans and the French. These processes are obviously not unique to the Syrian case, but they have their own specificities and histories. Some of these technologies of death were used in urban settings such as Sarajevo or Gaza. The US is a leader in the field — the military constantly produces high definition maps and gathers topographic and urban information. The US war in Iraq is one example, but there are many others.

The point is that we have to analyze the ways space in Aleppo was weaponized to better understand how the regime defeated the urban revolt. At the same time, the spatial technologies deployed in Aleppo are not easily transposable to other contexts. Therefore, more studies are needed to better comprehend the impact of urban violence in Syria.

In the third chapter of your book, based on your reading of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, you develop the concept of popular nationalism (as distinct from the nationalism of the rulers or the state). What is the significance of this popular nationalism? Doesn't nationalism today fall short in view of the fact that the social and economic problems in the region (and beyond) are the same everywhere and that the Syrian revolution is part of a regional movement?

The Left does not take the question of nationalism seriously enough. Nationalism is often dismissed as reactionary and antithetical to anti-capitalist internationalism. I believe it is essential to understand nationalism in a context such as the Syrian one.

In this chapter, I oppose two types of nationalism. The first type is state-centric. It is the nationalism of the Baath Party which is a form of domination over the population. It conflates the nation, the Baath Party, and Assad (the father until 2000, and the son thereafter). The nation is personified by the dictator. The first type of nationalism is evidently top-down, it was theorized by intellectuals and is based on specific texts. It is rigid, and yet pragmatic in the sense that its primary purpose is to further the domination of the state.

In opposition to state nationalism, there is a popular nationalism. It emanates from below and is praxial, which means it results from people's struggles. Popular nationalism has anti-colonial/anti-imperialist roots that could be repurposed to resist dictatorship in a postcolonial present. It is a nationalism in movement. During the revolt, the social world undergoes drastic transformation. It could disintegrate without a unifying ideology such as nationalism.

Obviously, there are other ways of creating a political bloc against the Assad regime. Class identity and opposition to dictatorship could create such cohesion among revolutionary groups. However, due to the weakness of the left and the inexistence of independent unions, class identity was not strong enough to create an anti-hegemonic bloc. To further fracture the opposition, the Assad regime weaponized sectarianism.

The purpose of this chapter is not to replace class analysis with a nationalism framework but rather to highlight the importance of developing an analytical framework that combine both identities. The chapter engages with the work of Caribbean intellectual Frantz Fanon who studied nationalism in the context of decolonization. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon studies the emergent nationalism in the Global South. Fanon shows how nationalism can be deployed by various social groups after independence to achieve specific goals. As such, post-independence nationalism can be authoritarian and chauvinistic or emancipatory, depending on who is producing it.

I argue that the popular nationalism of the early phases of the revolt was against dictatorship but also opposed the bourgeoisie connected to the regime. A powerful song titled "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar" (Come on Bashar, Leave) became the anthem of the revolution. It denounces dictatorship

but also neoliberalism which is personified by Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad and one of the wealthiest men in Syria.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to a micropolitical study of the revolution in the city of Manbij. Why did you choose Manbij? What were your experiences, and what challenges did the revolutionaries face?

Manbij is a city in Northern Syria where I spent several months back in 2013. What was interesting in the case of Manbij is that it was far from the battlefields. It was a place where people had the possibility to develop strategies and politics from below despite the weekly airstrikes. It is a place where people tried to deconstruct the state to build alternative/ autonomous politics.

I think it is important for scholars and activists to study cases such as Manbij. How do you dismantle dictatorship in a place like Syria? It is a difficult endeavour, because dictatorship is much more than Assad. It is also a culture, politics, space, and institutions. Even agriculture in Syria was impacted by that authoritarian mindset.

People are facing major challenges, but they were often able to overcome them in creative ways. We have to understand - and many people did not realize that before 2011 - that a revolution is an extremely violent process. So Manbij was facing some of these challenges such as weekly or monthly airstrikes, lack of funding, and a dearth of expertise to run the city, since many doctors, teachers, and engineers left the city. The city was split and a sizeable segment was neither pro-regime nor pro-revolution.

Despite the challenges, people in Manbij decided to take matters in their own hands. They began building a post-Assad Syria by creating new and more inclusive and democratic spaces. But sexism, patriarchy, and counter-revolutionary forces were unfortunately able to gradually weaken and finally crush that experience, which lasted less than two years.

Unfortunately, many of the approaches to self-empowerment and self-organization that you describe for Manbij have hardly been noticed outside Syria. One exception is the northeastern region administered by the Kurdish autonomous authorities, which, together with Idlib in the northwest, is one of the two areas of the country not controlled by the Assad regime. How do you assess the development there?

There are different scales and modalities of politics taking place in northwest Syria. I am critical of the PYD and its centralized politics. However, the Rojava experiment is much more than the PYD and conventional politics. There is lot of creative experimentation in the region with grassroots politics.

The Kurds were subjected to Arab chauvinism and racism for decades, from both the government and the population. The Assad regime enforced a policy of Arabization of the region by displacing many Kurds and creating a buffer zone between Kurds living in Syria and Turkey. It built an alliance with some of the local Arab tribes to police the Kurds. This fragmentation was difficult to overcome on both sides (Kurdish and Syrian opposition) when the revolt started in 2011.

In addition, many Arabs were displaced by the PYD when it controlled certain regions in Northern Syria. Despite these difficulties, I believe that there are many of positive things happening in Rojava. Kurdish women are actively challenging patriarchy. Grassroots groups are pushing back against the undemocratic tendencies of the PYD. Various Kurdish groups are building relationships with other revolutionary groups such as the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, and anarchists groups in Europe and the US.

The Arab revolutions that began in 2011 have largely been pushed back. At the same time, in Syria, signs point to a “normalization” of the Assad regime. The Jordanian king is on the phone with Assad, several Arab states have embassies in the country again, and Syria is set to host an Arab energy conference in 2024. Has the Arab democracy movement in general and the Syrian revolt in particular failed?

Obviously, the Arab revolts are the result of a systemic crisis in the region and beyond. The entire world-system is going through major crises - of neoliberalism, of capitalism, of democracy, of the state, and of culture. We are facing all these challenges, and the Arab revolts are a result of that worldwide process.

It is unfortunate that at the moment counterrevolutionary forces were able to dominate, but the revolutionary process is still ongoing. What we saw since 2011 is only the beginning of a much longer process which might take decades before reaching its conclusion. The question for revolutionary forces is how to develop more inclusive politics and how to build alliances with neighbouring countries. I do not think that Syrians will be able to overthrow the Syrian regime without building a regional strategy with revolutionary forces in Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Bahrain, Palestine, Rojava, Iran, etc. Only then the balance of power might shift.

In the past ten years we learned from our failures. We have to think about how to face multi-dimensional reactionary forces — how to counter authoritarian rulers in the Arab world, reactionary Islamists, and imperialist forces. We must oppose the conflation of groups such as ISIS with pious democratic groups.

Finally, the question of opposing imperialism (US, French, British) and sub-imperialism (Russia, China) must stay central. Some revolutionaries in Syria underestimated the power of Western imperialism and we are now paying the price. In addition, the Left must think about how to reintroduce class analysis into the Syrian political sphere. Class analysis should not be dogmatic nor exclusionary, but must rather be rooted in culture and history. These questions will be with us for years to come and they need to be thought not only in the Syrian context but also at the regional level.

What could be the role of the diaspora in this context?

The Syrian diaspora must understand the intricacies of politics in the host countries and build bridges between progressive forces in these host countries and revolutionary forces in Syria. When the revolt erupted in 2011, the first waves of Syrian migrants were not paying much attention to politics in the Western countries. Most Syrians who lived in the West prior to the revolt focused on building relationships with the ruling parties instead of revolutionary and grassroots forces. Some Syrians in the diaspora aligned themselves with reactionary groups in the West.

The Syrian left was able to build important alliances with progressives and internationalists despite its structural weakness. Syrians living in the West have to understand how politics operates and aspire to build alliances with movements fighting against neoliberalism, imperialism, patriarchy, fascism, and white supremacy. I think it is a difficult task but a vital one if Syrians in the diaspora want to build a solid international alliance.

Yasser Munif

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Footnotes

[1] Abd ar-Rahman Munif (1933-2004) is one of the most widely read authors in the Arab world, even after his death. He became known in the West primarily for his novel *East of the Mediterranean* and the pentalogy *Cities of Salt*.