

# **An Anti-Authoritarian Analysis of Syria's Uprising and Civil War**

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The devastating civil war that has followed the popular uprising in Syria which began in March 2011 has to an extent drowned out the legitimate grievances of the civil-protest movement against Assad and Ba'athism. This war has been greatly inflamed by support by the U.S. and Israel along with the reactionary Gulf monarchies for anti-Assad rebels on the one hand, and aid provided to the regime by Iran and Russia on the other. In addition, clearly, this geopolitical dynamic has driven the rise of ISIS/Islamic State, and it informs the new war being waged by the NATO-Arab monarch "coalition." In contrast to the neoliberal authoritarianism of Assad and the reactionary fanaticism of ISIS and associated rebel-groupings, though, the Kurds of northeastern Syria (Rojava) are working to institute a more or less anti-authoritarian society. Hope may be found in this social model, as in the direct action of the uprising.

"Behold where stands the usurper's cursèd head. The time is free."  
– Shakespeare, MacBeth, Act 5, scene 8

The popular uprising in Syria that has demanded the fall of Bashar al-Assad and an end to Ba'athist domination since its beginning in March 2011 poses a number of questions for the international left, particularly anti-authoritarians. For one, the Assad regime has long sought to present itself as an Arab State in steadfast resistance (*sumoud*) to U.S./Israeli designs in the Middle East, as well as a government that is more representative of Arab public opinion, compared with the various Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, not to mention the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It is significant, in this sense, that Syria's official title under Ba'athism has been the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), a name no doubt adopted as a marker of anti-monarchical distinction.<sup>1</sup> The SAR's progressive stance of resistance to monarchy notwithstanding, Syrian Ba'athism is clearly dictatorial, and it uses democratic centralism to attempt to legitimate its rule. As basic reflection on Assad's response to the initial uprising makes clear, the Ba'athist State is brutally elitist in both theory and practice.

The profundity of horror of the civil war that has followed the popular mobilizations in Syria is evident, and though not all the violence which has now raged for nearly four years can be attributed to the regime, its choice to respond to the explosion of popular protests in 2011 with ruthlessness no doubt precipitated the armed insurgency that subsequently developed against it. The civil war midwived by this conflict between people and State has taken on a decidedly international scope—for to understand events in Syria itself, one must also consider the geopolitical situation, wherein Syria is allied with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah as part of the "resistance axis" arrayed against the US, Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf States, or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Beyond such considerations, transnational jihadist networks from the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) have greatly inflamed the situation, having been born from the flames of this war—though not without considerable foreign support.

As against reactionary currents like al-Nusra and ISIS, progressive movements that have emerged from the activist movement against Assad and the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) show promise in terms of anti-authoritarianism, however much their efforts have seem to have been drowned out by the fighting. Above all, it would seem that the Kurdish libertarian-socialist currents which have grown considerably in northeastern Syria—Rojava—in connection with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's and Women's Protection

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<sup>1</sup> Firas Massouh, "Left Out? The Syrian Revolution and the Crisis of the Left," *Global Communism* (2013), 52.

Units (YPG/YPJ) show the most promise in terms of social revolution, though the substantial military aid such forces have received from the US and NATO to help break ISIS' siege of the border town of Kobanê since last September does raise some questions. An additional factor to consider when reflecting on the reported adoption and partial implementation by the PYD and its sister PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) of anarchist Murray Bookchin's philosophies of social ecology and libertarian municipalism is that the Kurds of Rojava have enjoyed autonomy from the Ba'athist state since its withdrawal of troops from the area in 2012. As a comrade pointed out in the question-and-answer period that followed the recent presentation by a representative of the Kurdish Anarchist Forum (KAF) on Rojava at the 2014 London Anarchist Bookfair, the more central regions of Syria have borne far more repression and destruction, due to the actions of regime and rebels alike.

In sheer terms of scale, it is overwhelmingly the Sunni majority of Syria that has suffered the most during the uprising and war, in light of the disproportionate number of dead and displaced who belong to this majority community. It has been Sunni neighborhoods and villages that have been the primary targets of the Ba'athist regime's brutal counter-insurgent strategy, which has involved indiscriminate artillery shelling, aerial bombardment, and SCUD missile attacks.<sup>2</sup> Different casualty estimates claim between 130,000 and 200,000 people to have been killed in Syria in the past five years, and the UN reports that 9 million Syrians have been displaced by the civil war, 3 million across international borders. Clearly, the war in Syria must be taken as among the most devastating ongoing conflicts in the world.

## **A Brief History of Modern Syria**

To begin to make sense of Syria's uprising and civil war, one must consider the history of the country and region. Excluding consideration of classical antiquity, the rise and spread of Islam, and the domination of the Levant by the Ottoman Empire, a truncated version of Syrian history would begin from the time of European colonization after the First World War, when the defeat of the Ottomans opened the possibility of self-determination for the Arabs who had previously been subjects of Istanbul. Characteristically, however, French and British imperialists decided themselves to appropriate former Ottoman holdings in the Middle East, dividing these into two regions that were demarcated by the infamous Sykes-Picot Line, agreed to in 1916. Thanks in no small part to the dialectically subversive and colonial machinations of T. E. Lawrence, Britain awarded itself Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, while France took Syria and Lebanon. In 1920, when French General Henri Gourard entered Damascus after defeating indigenous forces allied to Faisal bin Hussein—a Hashemite royal, related to the present Jordanian King Abdullah II—he is reported to have repaired to the tomb of the world-historical Kurdish general Salah-ad-din (Saladin), located in the Old City, and to have announced, "We're back!"<sup>3</sup> Such imperial arrogance notwithstanding, French colonialism did not survive long in the Levant, as an Arab-nationalist insurrection led by Sultan Pasha al-Atrash raged from 1925–1927, and mass civil-disobedience demanded respect for the popular will in favor of independence in Lebanon and Syria at the end of World War II.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013), 57, 192.

<sup>3</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (Amherst, Massachusetts: Prometheus Books, 2014), 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–57.

Though the French military tried to suppress both major uprisings using disproportionate force, it ultimately was forced to recognize that it had lost control of the Levant, and so granted these countries independence (Lebanon in 1943, Syria in 1946)—in a preview of further losses to the French Empire incurred at Dienbienphu in Vietnam and later, during the Algerian Revolution.

Following formal independence and the election to power of Arab-nationalists in Syria, the country joined the Arab League and resisted the expanding Zionist enterprise—though to little avail, in light of the events of May 1948. The Arab Ba’ath (“Renaissance”) Party was founded in 1946 by Michel Aflaq, a Damascene independent Marxist and pan-Arabist, and it enjoyed electoral successes during Syria’s first decade of independence.<sup>5</sup> The country engaged in an unprecedented federation with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt under the aegis of the “United Arab Republic,” though this collaboration lasted only three years (1958–1961). In 1963, the Ba’ath Party seized power in a coup, proclaiming the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), but it was not until 1970 that air force commander Hafez al-Assad took power. It was during this time of Assad’s rise that the Syrian Ba’ath Party was purged of its more radical elements.<sup>6</sup> Prior to Assad’s takeover, Syria allied itself with the Soviet Union, this being an alliance that has survived the USSR’s collapse: indeed, the ongoing relationship between post-Soviet Russia and the SAR is key to understanding the “balance of forces” in the present conflict, which has been marked by asymmetrical superiority on the part of the regime, at least in the early period of the uprising and war, before the rise of ISIS. In 2011, Syria was Russia’s second largest export-market for arms (a value of \$500 million), and Putin sympathizes with Assad’s presentation of the conflict as a struggle against militant Islamists, for this framing has clear echoes of the counter-insurgent campaign he and Yeltsin have pursued in the Caucasus, especially Chechnya, during the post-Soviet period.<sup>7</sup>

Special note should be made of the SAR’s foreign policies, since these have accounted for the relative historical and geographical uniqueness of Syrian Ba’athism, and the legitimacy that has been afforded it within many circles. Assad the elder and Assad the younger have kept up the appearance of making up a key part of the “rejectionist front” against the U.S. and Israel, as seen in the 1973 war Hafez al-Assad launched jointly with Egypt against the Jewish State, and the long-standing material and financial support the regime has provided to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Historically, Syrian Ba’athism has supported the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as well as provided safe haven for PKK fighters fleeing Turkish military repression across Syria’s northern border.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, moreover, Assad had hosted Hamas since 1999, when it was expelled by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, until the coming of the uprising, which led the group to break with the Syrian leader, in accordance with the international Muslim Brotherhood’s position of opposition to the regime. Hamas’s Khaled Meshaal ordered the Damascus headquarters to be packed up in January 2012, and since then, Hamas’s HQ-in-exile has tellingly been based in Doha, Qatar!<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, according to the analysis of Ramzy Baroud, Hamas may in fact be considered now as seeking to mend ties with the Shia resistance axis, in light of a lack of alternative sources of support, particularly as regards relations with neighboring Egypt following the junta’s coup against the Brotherhood’s Mohammed

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 60–61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 61; Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 173.

<sup>7</sup> Hokayem 172–4.

<sup>8</sup> Erlich 172.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 209.

Morsi in summer 2013. In turn, the SAR's historical support for Hamas can in some ways be considered an outgrowth of its opposition to Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a conflict that goes back to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). As regards Lebanon, the Ba'athist alliance with Hezbollah cannot be considered as separate from the regime's close ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran, with which the elder Assad quickly allied himself upon its establishment in 1979—however strange the image of a secular dictator embracing a fundamentalist Shi'ite clerical regime may be. In part, of course, the Assads' alliance with Iran has been driven by the split in Ba'athism between its Syrian and Iraqi branches, a division that took place in 1966: Assad supported Iran in its war against Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion, and he even sent 1500 troops to aid coalition forces against Saddam during Desert Storm a decade later.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, moreover, with regard to neighboring Lebanon, the SAR sent an invasion-occupation force to the country in 1976, supposedly to reduce tensions in the raging civil war, though tens of thousands of troops remained until they were forced out in the wake of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, an act that was widely blamed on the Assad regime. In terms of the politics of occupation, the elder Assad's support for right-wing Maronite Christian militias against the PLO in the Lebanese Civil War complicated the Ba'athist State's claim to serve revolutionary ends, even if Israel's 1982 incursion of Beirut and southern Lebanon was motivated in large part by the prospect of removing Syrian forces from the country.<sup>11</sup>

Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father Hafez following the latter's death in 2000. The younger Assad (34 at the time) was readily welcomed by the Syrian Parliament, which promptly lowered the minimum age of candidacy for the presidency to accommodate him, and he was "elected" with 97% of the vote in that year. While Bashar al-Assad has no doubt preserved the dictatorial nature of the Ba'athist State, thus carrying over the work of his father, earlier in his reign there was hope that he would bring liberalizing reforms to the SAR. Such hopes were motivated to a degree by the younger Assad's background, profession, and personal life—he was an ophthalmologist, not a military man, and was married to the British-raised daughter of a Sunni surgeon, and for this reason was personally acquainted with life in the United Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> The beginning of the younger Assad's rule thus coincided with the emergence of the ill-fated "Damascus Spring," a movement that sought to demand that the transition in power from father to son be accompanied by suspension of the State of Emergency Law (live since 1963), the release of political prisoners, and the implementation of liberal electoral reforms. Though Assad ultimately suspended such political reform efforts, he certainly has delivered in neoliberal terms—that is, in terms of serving the domestic and transnational capitalist class. After taking the reigns of the Ba'athist State, the younger Assad opened up the Syrian economy, selling off firms that previously had been State-owned, slashing subsidies for food and energy, and squeezing the financing of social services that had previously benefited the popular classes under the slogan of "Arab socialism." Besides, in 2001 Assad opened negotiations to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>13</sup> As has been noted, these economic reforms were not matched by a parallel opening in politics. According to Alan George, author of *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (2003), Assad's reform proposal was for a "China-style economic liberalization."<sup>14</sup> Ironically, and to an extent reflecting a Marxian dialectic-

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<sup>10</sup> Erlich 146–149, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Massouh, 60; Erlich 67–68.

<sup>12</sup> Hokayem 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 26–27, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Massouh, 63.

tic, Assad's neoliberalism has adversely impacted the living standards of the majority of Syrians, particularly rural residents, many of whom would go on to join the burgeoning popular mobilizations against the regime in 2011, even while it was precisely these elements that had constituted Syrian Ba'athism's primary social base in previous decades.<sup>15</sup> Political reform in the SAR would not come until the first month of the uprising, when Assad was forced to announce the suspension of the Emergency Law and a limited amnesty for political prisoners, in addition to granting citizenship to Syria's 300,000 Kurds, who to that point had been stateless under Ba'athism.

While Assad's economic policies are neoliberal and orthodox, given their empowerment of a high bourgeois Sunni class that forms a critical pillar of support for Ba'athism—and in this sense, one sees a clear parallel to post-Soviet Russian society, with the oligarchs and grand capitalists who have supported Vladimir Putin, one of Assad's closest allies—he has maintained the SAR's posturing of resistance to US/Israeli and reactionary-Gulf monarch designs in the Middle East. Assad greatly opposed the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Syrian State has hosted more than a million refugees from that conflict. What is more, Assad facilitated the entry of Sunni jihadists into western Iraq to resist the US occupation.<sup>16</sup> Taking these factors into account, and thinking of the SAR's support for Palestinian and Kurdish resistance movements, a fruitful parallel can perhaps be drawn between Assad and Mu'ammarr al-Gadhafi, who during his tenure championed Pan-Africanism and supported guerrilla groups resisting Israel and the West both financially and materially. The difference in fate between these two Arab dictatorships would seem to have to do with timing more than anything else: the unexpected NATO war to topple Qadhafi served as a precedent for Russia and China in terms of any possible repeat-action vis-à-vis Syria at the UN Security Council. After Qadhafi's ouster, Putin and China would not countenance another opportunistic authorization of use of force by US/NATO forces. In fact, this geopolitical dynamic can to a degree explain the increasingly desperate recourse Obama made in September 2013 to try to commence an open air-bombardment campaign against Assad in the wake of the sarin gas attack in al-Ghouta, outside Damascus: first, POTUS claimed he would—much like his predecessor, on a similar pretext—act unilaterally with force, but he then backed down amidst marked opposition at home and on the international stage. When John Kerry off-handedly observed that the war-drive could be demobilized if Assad gave up his chemicals weapons, Putin's diplomats jumped at the opportunity, arranging a deal whereby Assad would surrender his non-conventional weapons stocks—though significantly, while not demanding the same of Syria's Zionist neighbor. This compromise contributed greatly to a de-escalation of tensions, thus averting a Libya-type operation in the Levant, which imaginably would have had similar results in terms of the fate of the regime and Syrian society. Tripoli's official government has seen it necessary to flee the rampaging fundamentalist Islamists unleashed by NATO; it now bases its operations on a Greek car-ferry off-shore the eastern city of Tobruk.

## **March 2011: The Beginning of the Uprising**

Undoubtedly, many of the initial demonstrations against the regime in 2011 raised legitimate grievances against Ba'athism: its corruption, inequalities, and authoritarianism. As is known, the Syrian uprising came late in the process known as the "Arab Spring," months after the events in

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<sup>15</sup> Achcar 177.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 178.

Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen had begun. The popular rebellion started as a response to the imprisonment of several elementary-school boys who had painted the famous saying from the Arab revolts (*al-sha'ab yourid isqat al-nizam*, “the people want the fall of the regime”) as graffiti on their school in the southern Syrian city of Deraa. When their parents and other local adults mobilized to demand their return, the police are reported to have denied them access, and even threatened that the children would never be seen again. This grave insult to popular dignity catalyzed progressively larger protests in Deraa that ultimately met the bullets of State authorities, in turn leading to the explosion of protests in other parts of the country, first in the traditional anti-Assad bastions of Homs and Hama. (This latter city, comprised of the Sunni majority, was the site of a ghastly repression inflicted by Ba’athist paratroopers in response to an uprising organized there by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982; between 10,000 and 40,000 Syrians were killed.<sup>17</sup>) Even in Damascus, poor and middle-class individuals and families demonstrated against the regime in the early months of the rebellion, though in Aleppo and Latakia, home to more minorities, protests were less forthcoming.<sup>18</sup> In terms of class and geography, the character of the protest movements seems to have been sharply divided between poor rural and urban Syrians, Sunni and secular, from the working classes and middle classes, as arrayed against big business (including and especially the Sunni high bourgeoisie), the military/State apparatus, Alawites, and Assad himself. Christians certainly also have been targeted by chauvinist currents within the opposition, and many have supported the regime from the beginning due to fears of the specter of Islamist domination. Another factor has been the rural-urban divide, with palpable tensions between the better-off, presumably “progressive” urban dwellers of Damascus and the supposedly conservative, peasant background of many regime opponents.<sup>19</sup>

With reference to this early period of the conflict between people and State, it is important to clearly state that the militaristic and carceral violence imposed by Assad’s regime from above was stark and grossly disproportionate—and arguably, it was consciously so—in light of the detention of ten thousand Syrians in the first six months of the uprising, and a total of nearly sixty-thousand imprisoned since then. Such fascist tactics notwithstanding, regime soldiers and police were attacked and often shot dead at this time as well, most likely by armed Islamist groups who opportunistically took advantage of the destabilization initiated by the popular protests against Assad and Ba’athist domination. Over 100 State security officers were killed in the first month and a half of the uprising, with an additional hundred massacred at Jisr al-Shughour in June 2011. This death-toll on the regime side is certainly orders of magnitude smaller than the number of casualties inflicted on protestors in the early months of the uprising—nearly 2500 are reported to have been killed in the uprising’s first six months alone—but it can help explain the regime’s resort to an iron-fisted response, which its regime propaganda rationalized by playing up the angles of “foreign conspiracy” and “Islamist terrorist gangs.” Assad definitely missed a huge opportunity for de-escalating tensions when he failed to intervene and punish the elements of the security forces who had reacted brutally and contemptuously to the first protests in Deraa, but then again, he may well have believed from the start that only a highly authoritarian approach to dealing with the popular revolt would allow his regime to survive.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid 178–179.

<sup>18</sup> Hokayem 45–49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 40–41.

With the passage of time and the transition from popular uprising to insurgency and civil war, as spurred on by regime brutality, the regime's military-police apparatus took increasingly macabre means to suppress the civil uprising: it began employing artillery against rebel positions and civilian areas alike in fall 2011, followed by aerial bombardment in spring 2012, cluster bombs that summer, and then missiles in the fall.<sup>21</sup> Though the cities of Hama and Homs have met with great violence from the regime from the beginning of the uprising, Deraa, Aleppo, Idlib, and the suburbs of Damascus have been subjected to as much devastation, if not more. Intriguingly, it would seem that Assad's commanders have chosen to rely more on artillery and air-power than the infantry and armored divisions to serve the end of repression, due to the greater risks of defection involved in the use of regular ground-troops, who are overwhelmingly Sunni conscripts.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, to ensure the loyalty of the military and security services to Assad, the officer class and intelligence agencies are mostly constituted by Alawites.<sup>23</sup>

After months of initial civil protest against the regime—some currents of which had demanded mere parliamentary reforms at the outset, but then were subsequently radicalized by the regime crackdown, coming to demand no less than the fall of Assad and Ba'athism altogether—the popular-activist movement was eclipsed by the resort to armed struggle, as prosecuted both by Islamist opportunists and more secular rebels, including thousands of defectors from regime forces, a handful of whom proclaimed the foundation of the Free Syria Army (FSA) in June 2011. In addition to army defectors, it is understood that FSA ranks were filled at the beginning as well by volunteer civilian-militants driven to resist the regime by force of arms. In this sense, the beginnings of the FSA must not be conflated with what the FSA subsequently has become, following the pernicious influences the CIA, GCC, and competing Islamist rebels have had on the FSA brigades. In parallel to the FSA's armed struggle, an important anti-authoritarian development has taken place among the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) that have managed regions of Syrian territory from which the regime has been expelled during the war. According to the estimation of Lebanese Marxist Gilbert Achcar, the praxis of the LCCs has made the Syrian uprising “the most democratically organized” of all the Arab revolts that began in 2011.<sup>24</sup> As a matter of fact, the decision regime forces made early on to dismantle these decentralized units by arresting their principal organizers played an important part in the general shift from civil to armed tactics on the part of increasingly more regime opponents.<sup>25</sup>

Speaking of the oppositional movements to Assad—besides class considerations, which can again be summarized broadly as pitting the poor and middle classes among the Sunni majority against Sunni capitalists, Alawites, and the regime's repressive apparatus, religious identification has been a critical factor in the course of the uprising and civil war. Due to the particularities of Syrian Ba'athism, especially the younger Assad's neoliberal turn, Syria's rural poor hail overwhelmingly from the Sunni majority (74% of the population), while families and members of the Alawite and Christian minorities (12% and 10%, respectively) have been the most economically privileged groups under Ba'athism, besides the Sunni high bourgeoisie. Though notable exceptions exist to the established trend of Alawite and Christian support for the regime, it generally holds to be true: like the even smaller Druze and Shia minority groups of Syria (4% of the popula-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 57.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 58.

<sup>23</sup> Achcar 174.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 182.

<sup>25</sup> Hokayem 69.

tion), Alawites and Christians fear domination by chauvinist interpretations of Islam, like those expressed and affirmed by the majority of the armed groups that have lined up against Assad.<sup>26</sup> If one looks to history *and especially the present*, one can understand such fears: consider the collusion between the Egyptian military and Wahhabis to attack and massacre Coptic Christians after Mubarak’s fall, or ISIS’s ethnic-cleansing operations against Christian Yazidis and Shia in Iraq and eastern Syria.

## Islamization of the Anti-Assad Opposition

During this time, early on within the unfolding of the Syrian uprising, the oppositional movement was largely “hijacked” by Islamization and sectarian jihad. The “pro-rebel” narrative on this evolutionary process, which is accepted by some on the left, indeed, is that the regime’s violent repressiveness made a non-violent social transformation of Syria impossible, such that protestors were forced to take up arms. However, as the *Angry Arab News Service* editor As’ad Abu-Khalil rightly notes, this explanation leaves unclear why the armed insurgency so quickly became dominated by jihadist elements, with the more secular FSA units progressively eclipsed on the battlefield over time. Realizing the fears of many reasonable regime opponents regarding the option for an armed approach to resistance, the option for armed insurgency has brought the imposition of a reified power on the Syrian masses who previously had struggled legitimately against Ba’athist domination, as militarization, sectarianism, and Sunni chauvinism took hold.<sup>27</sup> Besides the FSA, one cannot overlook the primacy of reactionary movements like Ahrar al-Sham (Free Islamic Men of the Levant), Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat Islamiyya (Islamic Front), Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), and ISIS itself in this second phase of the Syrian saga. All of these groupings have been heavily influenced by Wahhabism, otherwise known as Salafism, or openly endorse it—this being an extremely intolerant and highly authoritarian interpretation of Islam based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abed al-Wahhab (1703–1792 CE). It is well-known that the opposition driving many of these extremist Sunni groups has been hatred of the SAR’s secularism and the regime’s privileging of Alawites, who are considered by Wahhabis as “*nusayris*,” or fake Muslims—that is, infidels!

This process toward the militarization and Islamization of the opposition to Syrian Ba’athism has not primarily been an organic Syrian process, as it has undoubtedly been fueled greatly by the influx of thousands of foreign fighters pertaining to these various Islamist gangs and the significant support provided to these in terms of funding, arms, and training by the KSA, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, and the U.S./Israel. The degree to which these outside imperialist interests have provided support to the different currents within the anti-Assad opposition has been variable, yet it has been considerable nonetheless: a “conservative” estimate of the quantity of arms supplied to rebels by the US/GCC has been calculated as amounting to at least 3,500 tons, in accordance with the findings of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Indian Marxist Aijaz Ahmad cites estimates that Qatar has provided between \$2 and \$6 billion to rebel forces in Syria. Officially, the U.S. gave only “non-lethal aid” to Free Syrian Army units in the first couple years of the civil war, though numerous stockpiles of US-made heavy weapons as well as tanks and armored-personnel carriers have made it into the hands of ISIS—“appropriated,” the story goes,

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: Hurst and Company, 2012), 29–54.

<sup>27</sup> Hokayem 81.

as they were by ISIS from other anti-regime forces, as well as Iraqi Army units, who surrendered Mosul so quickly when confronted with IS hordes this past June. Turkey and Jordan both host CIA bases where arms have been “coordinated” and “moderate rebels” trained. Additionally, it has come to light that Israel provides medical aid to rebel fighters injured by regime forces in southern Syria—recall that the Israeli military shot down a regime jet over the Golan Heights in September 2014 that was bombarding al-Nusra positions, and consider that the Jewish State has bombed Syria on at least six separate occasions since the start of the uprising and civil war, with the most recent coming being just in December 2014.<sup>28</sup> With regard to the relationship between ISIS and the GCC, it is not necessarily true that KSA and Qatar *State* interests have funded ISIS specifically, but the evidence does suggest that *private* interests from these countries, as well as in Kuwait and the UAE, have been seminal in ISIS’ meteoric rise. Besides, what is ISIS but an extreme expression of the “moderate” rebels that have been openly supported by Qatar and the KSA for years? It would seem that, other than for the Kurds and certain elements within what remains of the FSA, the spectrum of armed resistance to Assad is limited to the far-right dimensions of political thought.

## **Foreign Factors Prolonging and Intensifying the War: Empire and Climate Catastrophe**

The Syrian Civil War has been as bloody as it has been drawn-out principally due to the material and financial support of broadly different imperialisms for the two (or three, or four) sides of the conflict<sup>29</sup>: Russia and Iran supporting Assad on the one hand, and the KSA, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, and the US/Israel supporting various rebel factions on the other. Shamus Cooke makes this point knowingly on in a July 2013 piece on *Truthout*, though he does not name the Russian/Iranian support for the SAR as similarly contributing to the war’s prolongation. To an extent, the different constituent parties on the NATO/GCC side would seem to disagree on exactly which oppositional groups to aid and favor, and there has been some speculation that the US and Israel in fact prefer Assad to any Wahhabi or Salafist movement that could follow him, which would likely be allied to forces like ISIS—such that US/Israeli support for the rebels could be argued as seeking simply to install a solidly pro-Western strong man to replace Assad, perhaps someone like FSA General Salim Idris. This end clearly would serve US/Israeli designs for regional hegemony, as it would GCC interests—the excision or neutralization of a major component of the “resistance axis” in the Middle East. Yet this goal seems very illusory at the present time, when the FSA is greatly weakened in terms of the balance of forces in the civil war. Indeed, many former FSA units have reportedly abandoned the brigades to join the more successful Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Besides the ongoing conflict between people and State, the main military conflict at this time is between the regime and ISIS, with the newly forged NATO-Arab monarch coalition’s air-war against ISIS arguably and ironically serving Assad’s strategic objectives in some ways.

Besides the very real arms and cash provided by the NATO/GCC side to the rebels since the beginning of the uprising and civil war, it bears mentioning that the specifically Saudi ideological influence on the rebel-currents predates the current disturbances by decades. Flush with unimag-

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<sup>28</sup> Erlich, 250–255.

<sup>29</sup> The two principal sides are Assad and ISIS, though the FSA could be considered a third front (one that arguably is on the way out), with the popular civil struggle against Ba’athism a fourth.

inable wealth yielded by the exploitation of its massive petroleum-deposits in the late twentieth century, the KSA has long prioritized proselytization of its particularly reactionary interpretation of Islam, Wahhabism, throughout the Muslim world, with well-known noxious effects. Saudi Arabia's support for the Deobandi school of Islam among Pashtun refugees in Pakistan was seminal to the success of the Taliban in taking power in war-torn Afghanistan, a society exhausted in 1996 by more than a decade of Soviet occupation and the years of civil war among Afghans that followed Soviet withdrawal. More fundamentally, of course, the Saudis' matching of funds and arms supplied by the CIA to the *mujahideen* via Pakistan during the Soviet occupation itself played a critical role in the strengthening of reactionary, fundamentalist forces in the region. The story is not entirely dissimilar in the case of Syria, where Saudi private and public resources have been directed to chauvinist opposition forces that have to varying degrees now melded into ISIS. Moreover, the KSA's established sectarianism in supporting Sunnis against Shi'ites and thus presumably Iran—see the Saudi invasion of Bahrain in 2011 to suppress the Sunni-Shia popular uprising against the ruling Khalifa dynasty there, itself being Sunni—has further polluted the geopolitical context of the region, such that Sunnis and Shi'ites increasingly face off against one another on religious lines, as in Iraq, rather than organize jointly against the capitalists, monarchs, Zionists, and other authoritarians. The toxic legacy of the KSA's Wahhabism in terms of suppressing left-wing and humanist alternatives in the Middle East should be clear for all to see.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, it is not terribly difficult to see how aspects of the Syrian and foreign opposition to Assad have been framed primarily in religious terms, with political Islam seemingly resonating far more as an identity of resistance to the regime than leftist sentiments. With this said, however, the decline of regional left-wing forces cannot be blamed exclusively on the KSA, for the Assads clearly have contributed to this dynamic as well, as the US, Israel, and Iran have.<sup>31</sup>

Another critical aspect to consider in terms of imperial power and oil politics is the role that environmental and geographical factors have played in the development of the uprising and civil war. From 2006 to 2011, Syria suffered an unprecedented drought which in all likelihood follows from the observed decline in Mediterranean winter precipitation over the past four decades, a change which the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has attributed to global warming. The drought has been far worse than any experienced during the twentieth century, and has even been described as the worst since the onset of agricultural civilization itself in the Near East. As can be imagined, this new ecological situation has worsened poverty, especially for pastoralists and agriculturalists in Syria's rural regions, and contributed to a mass-migration of these effective environmental refugees. It has been argued that this ecological-demographic shift, which has involved an estimated 1.5 million people, greatly exacerbated anti-Assad sentiments, and that it would indeed act as a "threat-multiplier" as regards the stability of the regime with the coming of the uprising. Yet it must not somehow be thought that Assad is entirely the innocent victim of climatological chance here—or really, more accurately said, the previous and ongoing legacies of mass-carbon pollution by the West—for his liberalization of the economy itself certainly gave monopoly-capital a free hand in exploiting water reserves with abandon, leading to marked falls in water-table levels and thus greater societal vulnerability to turns of

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert Achcar, *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Massouh, 58–59.

events like a devastating drought that in turn is intensified by anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD).

Coming to the present, and to consideration of what could or should be done, an arms embargo for all parties to the conflict could be one means of de-escalating the Syrian Civil War, as would be the renunciation by the US/Israel of a war-footing against Iran, as Richard Falk recommends, in addition to progress toward transforming the Middle East into a nuclear- and weapons-of-mass-destruction-free-zone (NWFZ and WMDFZ).<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, is difficult to envision how such steps would realistically be implemented, given the established hegemonic interests on both sides of the conflict, both in terms of Syria itself as well as with regard to Iran behind it. So far, the three iterations of the Geneva conferences on Syria's future and prospects for reconciliation between Assad and the opposition have accomplished little, as Shamus Cooke has reported. By excluding Iran from the talks and continuing to press forward with new funding for the FSA on the order of \$500 million, Obama shows his administration's lack of interest in seriously working toward a cessation of hostilities—in a parallel to the White House's reactionary standpoint on a number of other pressing global issues, from support for Israel to dismissal of the increasingly radical recommendations of climate scientists. In terms of the humanitarian and political dimensions of the ongoing drought in Syria, this would only seem to show the acute importance of concerted global efforts to radically reduce carbon emissions as a means of reducing the probability of future recurrences of eventualities like this one, or ones far worse indeed, that could imaginably affect billions of lives. As is clear, though, from any contemplation of the theater of the absurd on hand seen at the Twentieth Conference of Parties (COP20) in Lima, Peru, the global capitalist power-structure is far more interested in upholding its utter irrationality and violence than in dealing in any sort of reasonable fashion with serious existential threats like ACD.

In terms of the war itself, a cease-fire between the regime and rebel forces would be but a minimum demand for progress on the question of Syria's future. Though such an accord would not resolve issues regarding the ultimate fate of the regime or the importance of demobilization and disarmament—to say nothing of the geopolitical power-struggle—it would seem basic in terms of beginning to attend to the devastation wrought on the Syrian people and the region by this war. Another critical aspect is to ensure that the rights of the country's minority communities are protected in a future Syria; as has been stated, sectarianism and fears of Sunni majoritarianism have clearly driven many Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Shi'ites to side with the regime.<sup>33</sup> Granted, it is true that progress toward respect for cultural pluralism, as toward a resolution of the civil war in general, is now greatly complicated by the rise of ISIS, with the strange dynamic being symbolized by the unexpected phenomenon of NATO/GCC air-forces bombing positions within the delimitations of Syrian territory that are controlled by elements of the opposition they previously had supported against Assad.

## **The Promise of the Rojava Revolution?**

Within the course of the Syrian Civil War, which has self-evidently been so full of darkness, negation, and destruction, one potentially affirming development has been the unfolding of Kur-

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Falk, "What Should be Done About the Syrian Tragedy?" *The Syria Dilemma*, eds. Nader Hoshemi and Danny Postel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 61–75.

<sup>33</sup> Hokayem 11.

dish autonomy in the northeast of the country, known as Western Kurdistan, or Rojava. There, the PYD and the Kurdish Group of Communities (KCK) have overseen what some observers have hailed as a thoroughgoing social revolution—the “Rojava Revolution”—inspired to some degree by the anarchism of Murray Bookchin. While the revolution is said to have followed Bookchin’s philosophies of social ecology and libertarian municipalism, the KCK has referred to its particular praxis as “democratic confederalism,” or “Kurdish communalism.” These changes are in turn said to have reflected the recent internal reorientation of the PKK, with which the YPD and KCK are affiliated, from a traditional Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective seeking national liberation for the Kurds to a more communitarian-anarchist approach reminiscent of that taken by the Zapatistas in southern Mexico. The outcomes that have been reported from KCK communities, particularly thanks to the efforts of the Democratic Society Movement, or Tev-Dem, have been a rise in councilism and direct democracy, an internal supersession of the use of currency and a shift toward cooperative production within the KCK, and a marked emphasis on women’s emancipation and ecological balance.<sup>34</sup> Most recently, of course, the fate of the People’s and Women’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) have been in the minds and hearts of observers from around the world, who have watched as ISIS forces progressively surrounded the city of Kobanê on the Turkish border and besieged it for months on end, leading to the forcible displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and concern that the Salafist forces, if victorious, would carry out genocide in the city. Eventually, of course, the US-monarch “coalition” intervened against the ISIS menace as part of the aerial-bombardment campaign it had launched in August 2014: the estimated six hundred imperialist air-strikes targeting ISIS forces in and around Kobanê certainly contributed to the YPG’s victory against the Salafists, which was announced in late January.

The attack by ISIS on PKK affiliates in Rojava—an assault that was ultimately rebuffed by the intervention of NATO air-power—is not the first time these insurgent Kurds have had conflicts with elements opposed to Assad. In late 2012 and early 2013, the PYD and YPG/YPJ were attacked by FSA units, just as they have met with al-Nusra assaults at other times, whereas other FSA brigades have actually supported the YPG/YPJ in defending Kobanê. Relations between the Kurds and the Syrian rebels have not exactly been consistently amicable. In a parallel of sorts to the case with Alawites and Christians, Kurds in Syria—who incidentally are mostly Sunni themselves—have distrusted the mainstream Syrian opposition for being dominated by Arab nationalists who have proven unwilling to clearly ensure the rights of minorities in any post-Assad future for the country.<sup>35</sup> A clear parallel can be drawn here with relations between Algerian Arabs and the Berber or Kabyle minority that resides in eastern Algeria, for the Kabyles have resisted trends reflecting Arab chauvinism and centralization of power in significantly militant ways in the half-century following independence from France.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the socio-political strides made by the PYD, KCK, and YPG/YPJ in Rojava under admittedly non-ideal conditions, skepticism and concerns abound regarding the content and direction of the Rojava Revolution. For one, an anarcho-syndicalist perspective would question the liberal-parliamentary tendencies that certain Kurdish factions have been seen to favor over the councilism of Tev-Dem and the KCK. Anarchists should regard the Rojava experiment

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<sup>34</sup> For more details on the KCK’s accomplishments in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey), please see TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology*, trans. Janet Biehl (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Hokayem 80.

<sup>36</sup> David Porter, *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012).

truthfully, neither overlooking the trends toward parliamentary social-democracy and centralization in the movement, nor hold it all in utter disdain precisely due to these very tendencies. Beyond that, the recent dénouement in Kobanê, which saw NATO/GCC air-forces launch a continuous four-month bombardment of ISIS positions starting in September, just as the heroic defense had been overwhelmed and the city was in danger of falling, raises questions about the revolutionary character of the self-described Kurdish radicals. If the movement depends on the US military to save it from ISIS, then how anti-imperialist can it really claim to be? On the other hand, one could argue that the US/GCC has a responsibility to protect the town from falling to ISIS forces, given that these hegemonic powers are in fact to varying degrees to blame for the emergence of ISIS—particularly when one considers the constituent parts of the ISIS armory. Nonetheless, and while not overlooking the obvious differences in political orientation between the cases of Rojava and Libya, is this “tactical alliance” between revolution and reaction terribly distinct from the military support given by Obama and the French to the Benghazi rebels who arrayed themselves against Gadhafi? If one welcomes USAF’s intervention to “save” Kobanê, can one really reject the calls made by certain elements in the anti-Assad opposition for a US-enforced no-fly zone over the SAR? David Graeber provoked a great deal of controversy on the left when he suggested in early October—that is, early on within the airstrike campaign—that the West had to provide military assistance to the Kurds in Kobanê, or at least that it should pressure Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan to open the border to resupply the embattled YPG/YPJ and allow in Kurdish reinforcements like the Peshmerga—who were in fact allowed to cross over in late October. Whatever one may think about the morality of imperialist air-strikes defending social-revolutionary processes, the truth of the matter is that the Obama administration now has an “in” with the PYD, and it has reportedly entered into direct talks with the group. Admittedly, the problem is a complex dilemma, with no clear answers.

## **Conclusion: Historical and Philosophical Implications of the Syrian Uprising**

To conclude this discussion on Syria, which so far has been steeped in geopolitics, I would like to turn to some historical and philosophical considerations. The Syrian uprising provides yet another example of mass-popular rebellion demanding participation in the political realm; in this sense, it joins the long list of dignified popular insurrections that have aimed at the institution of People’s Power, as George Katsiaficas has chronicled them. To answer the question posed by Nader Hashemi in *The Syria Dilemma* (2013)—a question he takes from the left-wing and revolutionary historical tradition—the Syrian people do have the right to self-determination, and their struggle against Ba’athism resembles the earlier struggle against French imperial domination in important ways. However, it is highly questionable that the means to this desired end should be those advocated by Hashemi, in accordance with certain factions in the FSA and their civilian counterpart, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces: that is, a no-fly zone over the SAR enforced by NATO and the GCC, along with increased financial and military support for the “moderate” rebels.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Nader Hashemi, “Syria, Savagery, and Self-Determination: What the Anti-Interventionists are Missing,” *The Syria Dilemma*, 221–234.

Another question to ponder is whether the Syrian people have “inherited” the standpoint of sumoud and resistance from Ba’athism—with this being one of the SAR’s few positive aspects. Though the findings of current opinion polls of Syrians, both located inside the SAR and abroad, whether as refugees or as constituents of the diaspora, are unknown to me, it is to be imagined that they do support the Palestinian struggle and oppose US/Israeli/GCC designs for the region. Furthermore, if given the opportunity, it would be hoped that they carry this resistance to a dialectically higher level than what has been exhibited by the Assads, in support of the global struggle for anti-systemic change. Still, the observed collaboration of elements of the anti-Assad opposition and of the Kurdish revolutionaries with the US/Israel complicates matters, to say nothing of the ties between the far-right facets of the opposition enthralled to Wahhabism and their GCC backers.

In terms of political philosophy, the Syrian uprising and civil war present a number of intriguing ideologies to reflect on. Though clearly atavistic in its desire to re-establish a Caliphate in the Levant, ISIS is not strictly medievalist in its approach, as its sleek videos and propaganda style attest to. Moreover, as Murtaza Hussein has argued, ISIS can be considered as sharing more with Leninism, the Maoist Red Guards, and the Khmer Rouge than the early Muslims, given the theory to which it claims adherence, and which it strives to institute: that is, the liberation of the people (or Umma) from above via extreme violence, as waged by a vanguard group. Indeed, this approach would seem to echo that taken by Sayyid Qutb, a leading early member of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose “revolutionary” Islamist theory arguably was developed on the foundation of Lenin’s philosophy, with Islam replacing communism as the world-historical resolution to class struggle and human alienation in his account.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, the organizational style and underlying philosophies of the YPG and YPJ can be considered to recall Nestor Makhno’s Ukrainian anarchist army, the *Makhnovshchina*, and the anarcho-syndicalist brigades of the CNT/FAI in the Spanish Revolution. To a lesser extent, certain elements of the FSA could be said to have libertarian elements—not specifically in terms of the political views of many of the affiliated fighters, particularly in light of the mass-defection that has been observed of FSA units going over to groups like al-Nusra and ISIS, but rather in operational style, for the FSA from the beginning was reportedly comprised largely of decentralized and autonomous brigades that resisted an overarching command structure, until this was imposed with the coming of the Supreme Military Command (SMC) in December 2012. At present, according to Patrick Cockburn, FSA commanders receive their marching orders directly from Washington, such that any postulated similarities between the FSA structure and historical anarchist fighting-groups can be said to have been surpassed now in the historical process. As for Assad and Syrian Ba’athism, these can be viewed as variants on the Leninist and Jacobin traditions themselves, if we were to bracket the younger Assad’s neoliberalism for the moment: as in Iraq under Saddam Hussein (and notwithstanding the conflicts between Saddam and the Assads), Ba’athism in the SAR has taken on the form of a secular dictatorship that claims to represent the wishes of the people, both Syrian and Arab as a whole, through a sort of democratic-centralist observation of “the general will,” as conceptualized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Interestingly, it is in this vanguardist sense that Ba’athism and Qutb’s proto-Leninism converge politically, their basic divergence on the

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<sup>38</sup> As Adam Curtis explains in “The Power of Nightmares,” Qutb sought to apply authoritarian-socialist lines of analysis to the study of the Arab masses, who he thought had inauthentically internalized and accepted capitalist, materialist values from the West that fundamentally conflicted with the “truth” of Islam.

role of religion in society notwithstanding. According to its own narrative, Syrian Ba'athism has “stood up” to the supposedly backward and devout attitudes of ordinary Syrians, especially rural folks and Sunnis, and in this way preserved cultural and religious pluralism, relative freedom for women, secularism, resistance to Zionism and US/GCC imperialism, and the “progress” of the Arab nation—or, so the pro-regime argument goes.

I will close by quoting Herbert Marcuse, discussing Walter Benjamin: “To a liberated people, redeemed from oppressive violence, there belongs an emancipated and redeemed nature.”<sup>39</sup> While the Syrian uprising and civil war have self-evidently been primarily about social domination and human oppression, the popular struggle and mass-suffering seen in that country can be taken as representative of the times, a microcosm of the brutality visited by late capitalism on humanity and nature alike. Besides the evident human losses involved, the civil war has doubtless also greatly degraded the environment of the Levant, much as other wars have, including that of the Turkish State against the Kurds, as associates of the Cilo-Der Nature Association observe.<sup>40</sup> The political struggles in the Levant, which contain liberal, reactionary, fundamentalist, and revolutionary elements aligned against State terror, the police state, and militarism, illuminate the general struggle for a free humanity, which is developing as though embryonically. Without a doubt, the global revolution is made not just for humanity, but also for nature, without which humans cannot live, as the long-standing drought in Syria shows. In fact—again with reference to the recent COP20 conference—the uprising demonstrates what would now seem to be the sole means of interrupting existing trends toward total destruction: that is, direct action, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience. Though repulsed, shackled, and beaten, the humanist-insurrectional Geist seen in the Syrian uprising and the Rojava Revolution holds great promise for radical politics today and into the future: the primacy of reason over tradition and authority, an end affirmed in the ninth century by the Baghdadi heretic Ibn al-Rawandi. I will leave the last word for a famous Kurdish saying, which I have learned from anarcha-feminist Dilar Dirik, speaking on “Stateless Democracy”: “*Berhodan jian-e!*” (“Resistance is life!”)

*A shorter version of this talk was first presented at the November 2014 Boston Anarchist Bookfair.*

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<sup>39</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia: Collected Papers. Volume 6*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014), 126.

<sup>40</sup> TATORT Kurdistan, 158–60.

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