

Conflict Absorption and the Paradox of State Power in Syria

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Introduction

The study of Syrian politics in the late 20th and early 21st century typified debates about the relational power of (the Ba'ath) party, state bureaucracy, army, and regime. Hinnebusch's excellent book *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria*² charted a research program for scholars to think about how the intertwined structures of army, security, and bureaucracy evolved in post-1963 Syria. The processes through which social forces (such as peasants and students) and institutions were absorbed into the state provided frameworks for inquiring into state (trans)formation in the late 20th century. When Bashar al-Assad assumed power from his father in 2000, many scholars of Syrian politics remained interested in questions of state transformation and what trajectory state, army, security apparatus, and regime would assume. Implicit in this scholarship was the question of what was new and what was old in the post-2000 configuration of political power. On the eve of the uprising, Hinnebusch had delineated three distinct periods in the scholarly literature on Syrian statehood that paralleled the evolution of the state itself: early

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² Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant* (London: Routledge, 1990).

independence (1950s-1960s); the consolidation of authoritarian rule (1970s-1980s); and the liberalization period (1990s-2000s).³ Syria's catastrophe constitutes a new period for scholars to understand Syrian statehood more broadly and the relational power dynamics underpinning the party-army-state relation more specifically. The three distinct periods identified by Hinnebusch corresponded to a set of research problems that guided scholarship on Syrian statehood. Scholarship about the early independence period, for example, was interested in how state formation occurred in relation to Ba'athist power and the incorporation and exclusion of specific social forces, while research about the liberalization period was mostly interested in the problem of how the regime sought stability amidst economic liberalization. In my contribution to the special issue, I would like to suggest that the problem of understanding Syrian statehood in the post-2011 period is one related to how to understand conflict absorption into the state and the paradox of state power highlighted by Syria's territorial fragmentation. In the post-2024 period after the collapse of the regime, new challenges in understanding Syrian state transformation will emerge as many of those discussed here will persist.

My contribution is motivated by the question of how to understand Syrian statehood in the post-liberalization, conflict phase of state formation. I make two interrelated arguments about how we can study and understand Syrian statehood today in the context of conflict transformation. First, the normalization and bureaucratization of the logic of war reveals patterns of conflict absorption that are reorienting the state around the continuation of the conflict and targeting of state enemies. The absence of a formal peace process or peace agreement create the conditions of possibility for the materialization of new state practices that extend the logic of conflict into the future. The

³ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Modern Syrian Politics," *History Compass* 6, no. 1 (January 28, 2008): 263–85.

regime's ability to "craft peace"⁴ outside of external pressure and under the protective umbrella of the Astana process will give shape to the political order that emerges in the coming years. Conflict absorption also creates the conditions for the recruitment of new elite networks, reconfigurations of local power centers, and the institutionalization of enmity against state enemies. Second, the tension between regime claims of victory and Syria's continued territorial fragmentation highlight the paradox of state power. On the one hand, the regime is powerful enough to control most of Syria's territory and to lay claim to authority in these areas. On the other hand, large swathes of the country remain outside of state presence and control. How the state absorbs conflict and how Syria's territorial fragmentation is resolved (or not) into the future will shape how we understand Syrian statehood in the conflict phase of state transformation. This question remains relevant amidst the regime's collapse and the transition authority's inheritance of a fragmented country.

Conflict Absorption and State Power

The conflict has been defined and understood in large part through the phenomenon of physical violence inflicted by state and non-state actors against civilian populations. Salwa Ismail's excellent work on Syrian state violence argues that there exists a 'civil war regime' borne out of decades of Ba'athist rule that rendered violence governmental⁵. That is to say that governmental violence was not an aberration from an otherwise liberal politics but central to how the regime ruled and governed over Syria. Similarly, Shaery-Yazdi and Üngör argue that internal violence in Syria has a long history rooted in the

⁴ Kristian Stokke, "Crafting Liberal Peace? International Peace Promotion and the Contextual Politics of Peace in Sri Lanka," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 5 (October 30, 2009): 932–39.

⁵ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

country's post-colonial politics⁶. Historicizing state violence in Syria de-exceptionalizes violence after 2011 but also poses a conundrum about how we understand conflict and state enmity towards political opponents. Are state enemies always simply targeted for violence on the battlefield, in the prison, or on the street? Rather than focusing our attention on how the regime rules through violence, I am encouraging a different question by asking how war is absorbed, normalized, bureaucratized, and enacted gradually through different mechanisms of punishment that seek to expand and sustain existing governmental practices that bifurcate Syrian society into friends and enemies in relation to the conflict.

The central problem I explore in my book *Managing Syria's Conflict*⁷ is how we understand how war extends beyond the battlefield and is absorbed into the machinations of statehood. How do we study conflict absorption in Syria? What is it that we are looking for? Conflict absorption refers to both the forms of bureaucratization and institutionalization of a particular conflict logic and the reconfigurations of elite, state, and security power that enable such absorption. I understand conflict logic as something that emerges from a specific narration of a conflict by state or non-state powers that then materializes as a set of political strategies. Szekely argues that battlefield strategies can be understood through an inquiry into the conflict narratives (or logics) of armed groups⁸. For Szekely, differing conflict narratives produce different battlefield strategies. In the same light, inquiring into how conflict logic materializes beyond the battlefield requires us to consider the institutional, identity, ideational, and social forms of conflict's materialization. I am

⁶ Roschanack Shaery-Yazdi and Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Mass Violence in Syria: Continuity and Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 397–402.

⁷ Samer Abboud, *Managing Syria's Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Ora Szekely, *Syria Divided: Patterns of Violence in a Complex Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

not suggesting that the institutionalization of enmity is novel in Ba'athist Syria but rather that it assumes different, more legalistic and punishing forms, in the wake of conflict.

The regional and international context of a conflict is a major determinant of how conflict logic is absorbed into the state. Liberal peace approaches to conflict resolution emphasize the need to create new forms of belonging and political structures out of the ashes of conflict to prevent conflict recurrence, or, in other words, to suppress conflict logic. The state apparatus is intentionally reoriented around the suppression of conflict between different groups⁹. Post-genocide Rwandan authorities' articulation of a single identity around "Rwandan-ness"¹⁰ sought precisely to suppress the identity markers that fueled the genocide. Liberal interventions into conflicts seek to prevent the absorption of conflict logic into the state apparatus by creating new forms of belonging and power sharing that are either wholly new or whose antecedents are not associated with conflict or its narration. In Syria's case, however, the absence of external pressures on statehood has allowed the regime to absorb the enmity and exclusionary violence of the conflict into the state apparatus. The Astana Process has supplanted United Nations led efforts to initiate reconciliation¹¹. As the major forum for the deliberation over Syria's conflict, Astana has protected the regime from external pressures to reform state institutions and

⁹ Susan L. Woodward, *The Ideology of Failed States: Why Intervention Fails* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). I am referring to this as a problem of how external interventions produce different forms of post-conflict statehood. Woodward's argument is that these forms are structured around absorbing external interventions and not increasing domestic state capacity. Liberal interventions are not always successful in suppressing conflict as reforms often reproduce or ignore the conditions that gave rise to conflict in the first place.

¹⁰ Danielle Beswick, "Democracy, Identity and the Politics of Exclusion in Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Case of the Batwa," *Democratization* 18, no. 2 (2011): 490–511.

¹¹ Samer Abboud, "Making Peace to Sustain War: The Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace," *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2021): 326–43.

practices. The regime's isolation from external interventions has thus allowed for a pattern of conflict absorption that emphasizes enmity over reconciliation and which, I contend, will shape how we understand this post-2011 stage of Syrian statehood.

Conflict absorption is a process in which a narration of the conflict is bureaucratized and institutionalized and underpinned by power configurations that enact this absorption. I want to illustrate the complex processes involved here through an example of the state's approach to reconciliation that highlights how bifurcation unfolds in relation to the conflict. In 2012, a new state ministry called the Ministry of National Reconciliation was created. The stated aim of the new ministry was to foster national reconciliation between Syrians and to serve as an institutional platform for deliberation. The Ministry was a cosmetic body that mostly sponsored poetry readings and other cultural events that promoted 'dialogue' and 'understanding' that were effectively euphemisms for fealty to the regime. Reconciliation as a state-led process paralleled the violence and forced displacement realized through the *musalahat* (reconciliation agreements) imposed on besieged areas. The *musalahat* became a subjugating tool¹² of the regime's war that forced Syrians to decide between remaining in their homes under regime rule or accepting displacement to Idlib and essentially de-nationalization. These *musalahat* were at first negotiated by local actors in civil committees and when the Russian military forces entered Syria in September 2015 they began to standardize, oversee, and monitor their negotiations. The Russians established the Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria¹³ for the monitoring of national reconciliations based out of the Hmeim military base through which they would guide the

¹² Marika Sosnowski, "Reconciliation Agreements as Strangle Contracts: Ramifications for Property and Citizenship Rights in the Syrian Civil War," *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2020): 460–75.

¹³ The official title of the Center was *The Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic*.

work of the civil committees. One version of state-led reconciliation promoted social harmony through cultural events and the other materialized the logic of enmity against state enemies through forced displacement.

The *musalahat* were formally negotiated by civil committees located in different governorates who acted in the name of state reconciliation but were working under the authority of the security apparatus to ensure that state enemies would be forced out of areas under state control. The civil committees largely operated outside of formal state oversight while under the supervision of the local security apparatus. So wide was the gap between the Ministry and the civil committees that a parliamentary body reporting directly to the Council of Ministers was created to oversee the work of the civil committees, including appointing new members (who were always local notables and elites), although the Ministry of National Reconciliation was created to do precisely what the committees were doing. During one parliamentary session, Dr. Ali Haidar, the man heading the Ministry from its inception to its dissolution, complained that the Ministry's staff had never exceeded 35 people since its creation and could not do the work entrusted to it. He would strike a more somber tone in public interviews by declaring that the committees and Ministry worked together on reconciliations but there was very little control over the committees' work beyond rubber stamping new members who were always approved by the security apparatus. As the Russian military advances brought more and more territory under state control after 2016 the importance of the civil committees relative to the Russian military presence and the state apparatus increased considerably. Specifically, the civil committees emerged to take on important state functions around generating knowledge about the Syrian population that could then be marshalled to punish state enemies. Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Reconciliation was dissolved in 2019. The reconciliation agreements produced knowledge about who was living in besieged areas and what their political loyalties were

(thus who chose displacement were indexed as disloyal and those who stayed indexed as loyal). From these reconciliations emerged a settlement process that similarly sought to produce knowledge and act upon Syrians who were absent from the country or areas under state control. Again, the civil committees in these areas would be tasked with generating information about absent Syrians.

Civil committees have now assumed the responsibility for generating knowledge about Syrians and their property: who is displaced; what properties have been abandoned or damaged; how did people die; who engaged in ‘terrorism’; who can return, and several other questions that determine whether and how Syrians can live in their own country. The committees’ role in categorizing acts corresponds to a post-2011 legal architecture that seeks to punish Syrians for their ‘betrayal of the homeland’¹⁴. To enact punishment, Syrians must be categorized and acted upon accordingly. Once categorized, the names of citizens are sent to the Ministry of Finance that then issues circulars denouncing individuals for specific crimes and issuing measures for property appropriation or other forced forfeitures. Categorization and punishments extend to a series of crimes that broadly fall under the category of acts of disloyalty. Someone who is absent for desertion or who is known to have ‘hands stained in Syrian blood’ is indexed as a disloyal subject. Anyone caught in this web of categorization and punishment risks losing not only their assets but their social identity as a Syrian to own property, work, or reside in the country. Punishment is also extended to kin in various ways, such as the unexplained deactivation of close to 600 000 smart cards used to distribute state subsidies¹⁵. Syrians can, of course, ‘settle’ their status with the state through the settlement process to return to areas under

¹⁴ Samer Abboud, “Reconciling Fighters, Settling Civilians: The Making of Post-Conflict Citizenship in Syria,” *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 6 (2020): 751–68.

¹⁵ Joseph Daher, “Expelled from the Support System: Austerity Deepens in Syria,” February 15, 2022..

state control but this process does not guarantee restitution. Nor is ‘settlement’ a safe and secure process. Indeed, many people fear submitting themselves to settlement because of the potential for arrest¹⁶.

The practices of reconciliation and settlement bifurcate Syrian society into categories that index loyalty and disloyalty which in turn create subjectivities that the state can act upon. My contention here is that the relational power dynamics linking civil committees, the Russian military, and state institutions is one example of the process of conflict absorption through which the state is reoriented around the slow, gradual bureaucratic process of punishing Syrians. The question that I am interested in then is how we understand categorization and punishment as a new form of government in Syria that is reliant on the objective power (and fear) of violence but is nevertheless enacted through the slow bureaucratic process of appropriation and exclusion. Conflict absorption in Syria should be understood in terms of war’s normalization and institutionalization as a set of practices that seek to extend the enmity of war to the future. The withdrawal of subsidies for families, asset appropriation measures, the rezoning of land that is then acquired by the state, are all practices that are justified through a conflict logic that seeks to punish enemies. Statehood is thus increasingly refracted through the conflict’s narrative and aimed at the bifurcation of society into loyal and disloyal Syrians. The local power centers that have emerged to propel this bifurcation and punishment represent a new, significant social force that will exercise influence on Syrian statehood.

¹⁶ Samer Abboud, “‘The Decision to Return to Syria Is Not in My Hands’: Syria’s Repatriation Regime as Illiberal Statebuilding,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2023).

The Paradox of State Power

The paradox of Syrian statehood is that while the state has been reoriented around the punishment of disloyal subjects there are large areas of the country outside of state control, a tripartite power system (the Astana Process powers Turkey, Iran, and Russia) exercising control over major battlefield decisions, several US bases strewn throughout the Eastern part of the country, almost daily Israeli raids into Syrian airspace, and thousands of foreign militia fighters active throughout the country. How do we understand Syrian sovereignty and statehood in a context of overlapping external interventions into the country and territorial fragmentation and competing governance projects existing alongside state presence and power in other parts of the country? Hinnebusch argues that external intervention produced a de-constructed, failed state in Syria that allowed for groups such as ISIS to emerge and take root¹⁷. This argument encourages us to think about what the current forms of external intervention in Syria portend for the future of statehood. This is a broader question of how we understand the effects of territorial fragmentation on Syrian statehood.

Territorial fragmentation is best exemplified by the differing situations in the northwestern and northeastern parts of the country. In the northwest, several armed groups organized as the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the loose protection of the Turkish military vie for influence with a coalition of armed groups headed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in large parts of Idlib governorate. In the northeast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is an administrative body supported militarily by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The regime's response to the myriad governance projects that emerged after 2011 was an attempt to erase them from existence. The state's politics of erasure first targeted all expressions of alternative governance that had

¹⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, "State De-Construction in Iraq and Syria," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 57, no. 4 (2016): 560–85.

emerged after 2011 including councils, courts, civil administrations, and civil society organizations. These governance models had represented a threat to the reassertion of state authority in reconciled areas and were immediately disbanded after reconciliation. One of the many tasks of the local committees present in these reconciled areas was to identify what these governance projects were and who administered them as a step towards dissolving them.

The politics of erasure was principally enacted through the expulsion of known oppositionists from reconciled areas while alternative governance institutions were dismantled. Known members of governance bodies and even medical staff were forcibly expelled as part of the reconciliation agreements¹⁸. Expulsion also aided political bifurcation because it allowed local committees to identify, document, and initiate appropriation measures against known oppositionists. Forced expulsion was typically followed by legal measures that appropriated the individual's assets and the withdrawal of legal rights that allow them to live and work in Syria. These laws include Law No. 23 (2015) that expedited property expropriation; Law No. 11 (2016) that suspended property transfers in non-regime areas (and was made retroactive to March 15, 2011); Law No. 33 (2017) that completely transforms the issuance and management of property documentation; and Law No. 4 (2017) that alters the civil status code, among many others. Their expulsion was both physical and social¹⁹.

These practices in areas that fell back under state control suggest that the regime has no intention of absorbing any vestiges of opposition rule into the state. Continuing this policy towards the northwest and northeast may prove difficult given

¹⁸ Mazen Ezzi, "How the Syrian Regime Is Using the Mask of 'Reconciliation' to Destroy Opposition Institutions," *Chatham House*, June 26, 2017, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/how-the-syrian-regime-is-using-the-mask-of-reconciliation-to-destroy-opposition-institutions/>.

¹⁹ Abboud, *Managing Syria's Conflict: Enmity and Punishment as Illiberal Statebuilding*.

the current power configurations and external actors supporting the various armed groups that rule in these areas. Whether or not the AANES can be incorporated into the state as part of a deliberative process is the major question determining the future of this area and its relationship to the state. Regarding the northwest, whether the area, which is quite literally populated by people who have already been displaced by the state through reconciliation agreements or has otherwise refused to live in areas under state control, can be brought back under state control is a major question that will impact Syria's statehood. The issue of how millions of people who the state has branded as enemies could be incorporated back into the country has no clear answer. Moreover, while Turkey may be willing to strike a grand bargain that facilitates the (forced) return of millions of Syrians there is nothing to suggest that HTS will simply vanish or acquiesce to any agreement between the Syrian regime and the Astana powers. In any scenario, continued violence is likely to contribute to the resolution of both simmering problems in the northwest and northeast.

Any resolution to these outstanding territorial issues is likely to be independent of the issues of American bases and continued Israeli military incursions into Syria. At the same time, the Astana powers are formally guarantors of Syria's battlefield but seem uninterested or unable to address the American and Israeli involvement in Syria. There are more questions than answers as to how these various powers intersecting and relating to each other will contribute to Syrian statehood. Hinnebusch's argument about de-construction and Syria's descent into a failed state regarding ISIS may reasonably be extended into post-ISIS phase as we consider regional powers' role in Syria. The contours of what this de-construction and 'failure' look like in the coming decades will be an important area of inquiry into Syrian statehood.

Conclusion

Research into Syrian statehood will need to account for how the processes of conflict absorption exist alongside the paradox of state power wrought by the country's continued territorial fragmentation. The reconciliation and settlement processes foundationalize a form of statehood that is underpinned by elite networks, exclusionary laws, and institutions that seek to extend conflict into Syria's future. Future research into Syrian statehood needs to account for the relational power dynamics embedded in these processes and how the various layers of military and security power buttress them. This entails inquiry into altogether new forms of social and political power in Syria that emerged after 2011. How these forms of power emerge and co-exist will provide insights into Syrian statehood for decades to come. The country's continued territorial fragmentation in parallel to the reconfiguration of the social base of state power will also have profound effects on Syrian statehood. How the issues of the northwest and northeast resolve themselves will be of interest to scholars in the future.

Inquiry into conflict absorption into the state will necessarily require analysis of how institutions, laws, social networks, and the security apparatus coalesce around punishing state enemies in a context of diminished state institutional capacity. The sociology of these networks, how they materialize an elite tethered to the conflict, and what the political economy of their power looks like is an important area of inquiry to understand state power in the coming decades. Mapping who these networks are and how they supplanted existing elite networks will help researchers understand the power configurations that emerged out of conflict and how they sustain regime authority. To date, there are no serious funds or plans for reconstruction in Syria. These local networks are thus severely limited in their ability to enact any sort of reconstruction plan for the country. Instead, they serve as intermediaries or conduits of state power whose function is to work independently of centralized direction to appropriate and redistribute the appropriated assets of Syrians

deemed as enemies. The functioning of these networks is thus central to the state's project of punishing state enemies. They are nevertheless limited in having any effect on Syrian reconstruction.

The United States' recent passing of the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act (2023) that commits the United States to non-recognition of Syria while Bashar al-Assad remains in power reflects a general ambivalent Western approach to Syria. Western powers are unlikely to marshal funds for Syria's reconstruction anytime soon despite regime claims to victory and a very publicized repatriation process. Normalization with Arab states was a major victory for the regime but has not yet led to an influx of reconstruction funds as many within Syria expected. Syria's return to the Arab regional fold while remaining isolated by the West is likely to strengthen the regime's reliance on its main external allies Russia and Iran. For now, relations with Turkey remain tense but slowly moving towards normalization. This paradox of Syrian state power and the continued subjugation of major battlefield decisions to the Astana powers will be the major structural factor in understanding Syria's regional and international relations.

How we research Syrian statehood in the coming years and decades will depend on the questions we ask about the conflict's impacts on state power. The sociological, institutional, military, and political dimensions of state power have all been reconfigured since 2011. Given the paradox of state power and Syria's ongoing territorial fragmentation we are unlikely to understand this period of state transformation as anything concrete but rather defined by perpetual instability. This may mean that the conflict phase of Syrian statehood will be divided into different periods, such as the pre- and post-Russian intervention periods. Major shifts in the battlefield will have profound effects on how we understand Syrian statehood. Idlib's return to state control, normalization with the West or Turkey, the AANES' dissolution or incorporation into the state are all

potentially significant political inflection points that may periodize new moments of Syria's post-2011 state formation.