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A Few Lessons that Anti-Imperialists Should Learn from the Collapse of Assad



Image by Mahmoud Sulaiman.

I've been closely following the labyrinthine chaos in the Levant for most of my adult life now and I honestly didn't see this latest twist coming, at least not this fast and certainly not this soon. After surviving nearly half a century on Uncle Sam's shitlist and nearly 14 years in a turbulent proxy war with the last seven in a stalemate frozen in their favor, the seemingly indestructible regime of the Baathist Assad Dynasty collapsed like a rusty lawn chair after a 12-day putsch from an al-Qaeda derived coalition of Salafi throat slitters who have never governed a territory larger than Cleveland.

What the fuck? Seriously, what in the literal goddamn fuck just fucking happened here? This is like the Baseball Furies getting out of the ICU to take out the Gramercy Riffs in the final scene of *The Warriors*. Naturally, America seems pretty fucking pumped and why not, they've invested a pretty hefty portion of the national debt in this shitshow and now they're breaking both arms jerking themselves off for finally winning a prize. They even let Biden out of his cryogenic chamber to take credit for the birth of a kinder, gentler Islamic State as if he had planned it out this way all along.

Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to the Trump-approved Golan Heights to make similarly grandiose claims. And for once those two mincing, daylight vampires aren't totally off-base. Destabilize the shit out of an entire fucking time zone with a gory smorgasbord of genocide, famine, sanctions, quagmires, and other sundry imperial curiosities and even Denmark could fall to jihadi pirates, let alone a third world gangster state run by a cut-rate Corleone with a rapist's moustache.

But the absurdly abrupt collapse of Assad is way too complex to be the fruit of any one conspiracy. A lot of people can take credit for this clusterfuck and that includes Bashar himself as well as a lot of his buddies. I'm not a vodka soaked tankie anymore. I kicked that unfortunate lifestyle choice right around the time I switched genders and turned back to anarchism. I'm not about to sit here and pretend that HTS and their numerous sponsors deflowered a secular utopia with their shockingly successful little uprising. However, it is hard to avoid the bitter fact that their victory serves far greater evils than anything the Baathist Party could ever conjure. HTS or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham are an openly genocidal cult whose roots lead straight back to ISIS.

It's also hard for me as an armchair anti-imperialist not to grieve the further marginalization of the Axis of Resistance, a rag-tag coalition of mostly Shia militias that have proven to be the gnarliest thorn in the side of Pax Americana since those charming rice farmers in the Vietcong. All of this madness sets the table quite perfectly for a direct conflict with Iran that everyone will lose no matter who proclaims "mission accomplished" before the bodies stop dropping and the Axis of Resistance wasn't just a bulwark to this dismal outcome, it was one crowdsourced by dozens of local grassroots coalitions that Iran could only pretend to govern. This victory for western backed Salafism should be seen as a major setback for anyone who isn't too lost in their own dogma to realize that a very complicated world is a much harder world for any one empire to govern. With that being said, this story is far from over and it might even open up the map to a few opportunities but before we can look towards the future,

I think all sober minded western observers of imperium need to learn a few lessons from the near past that brought us to our current predicament.

1. It Was the Militias that Saved the Levant from ISIS and Israel Isn't the Only State that Diminished their Potency:

Much has been made of the fact that Israel's current war on pretty much everybody left Assad stranded without Hezbollah to save him and rightfully so. Hezbollah in many ways represents the Axis of Resistance at the pinnacle of its potency and I for one don't believe for a second that it's a mere coincidence that HTS chose to play Johnny-Bad-Ass when the toughest gang on the yard was locked into a ceasefire with one their allies. However, Hezbollah isn't the only force that reduced Assad's Salafi foes to a single ghetto in Idlib.

The Syrian Civil War was wrestled to the status of a frozen conflict for over half a decade by two other coalitions of militiamen. The first were the National Defense Forces who began as a diverse collection of popular committees formed by Alawites, Twelvers, Christians, and Druze to protect their own neighborhoods from genocide after Assad's government all but collapsed during the rise of the Islamic State. What was left of the Baathist regime decided to organize this coalition after Syrian officers began turning to them for more reliable foot soldiers than the usual corrupt cronies and terrified conscripts. Hezbollah stepped in along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to train them under Khomeini's widely successful Basij model of civilian led guerrilla warfare, and they were deemed the National Defense Forces.

By 2013, the NDF's numbers had reached 100,000. By 2016 they served as the bulk of the ground force that took back Aleppo and turned the tide of the war against ISIS and in Assad's favor. So, what happened to this fearsome army? The Russian Military happened. When Putin joined the fight to save Assad in 2015, he did so under the condition that the National Defense Forces be integrated into Syria's stagnant standing army and put under Russia's direct command, reducing what had been a highly affective localized corps of civilian militias with skin on the field into just another demoralized faction taking orders from white men who couldn't even pronounce the name of their village before they carpet bombed it.

And pretty much the same goddamn thing happened to the other coalition of civilian militias who helped crush ISIS, the Kurdish People's Defense Units aka the YPG, who actually set up a fully functioning and self-sufficient stateless society in their region of Rojava when Assad's ability to govern them waned. But then America stepped in to fuck it up. Fresh off of losing another squad of so-called moderates to Islamic State recruitment, the United States threw their weight behind the YPG in 2015, going so far as to imbed Green Berets amongst their

ranks and rebranding them as the Syrian Democratic Forces in a failed attempt to placate their genocidal NATO allies in Turkey.

The result was the bizarre spectacle of a bunch of once-proud anarchists becoming glorified errand boys for Uncle Sam, taking villages totally outside of their jurisdiction and holding Syria's largest oil field hostage. Now the US is strong arming the rebels formerly known as the YPG into handing over Manbij to Turkey while Anthony Blinken flirts with the Sultans back in Ankara and Turkish troops mass at the border. This leads me to my next lesson.

2. Trusting Any Superpower in the Third World is a Fool's Errand:

And this includes Putin's Russia. A lot of western analysts have observed that Russia couldn't be bothered to help their supposed allies in Syria because they were too busy engaging in their own quixotic imperialist adventures in Ukraine but a lot fewer of them have observed the fact that Russia's only Mediterranean naval port in Tartus has been largely untouched by the upheaval. In fact, according to Russia's own state media, Kremlin officials have been in touch with HTS representatives from the beginning of the uprising, who have surreptitiously guaranteed the continued security of Moscow's bases and diplomatic missions in the region.

This might explain why Assad slunk back to Moscow with his tail between his legs like a loyal dog without even making so much as a public statement to his own people. Russia could give two fucks and a hearty shit about the third world. They just want a cheap place to park their tanks. Che Guevara learned this the hard way when Khrushchev played Cuba like a poker chip during his little missile crisis, and he cursed the conspiracy of the "Global North" to his dying breath. As usual, Che was right but didn't take his critique nearly far enough. Cuba itself would become just another gulag because it invested the momentum of its indigenous populist uprising into the same model of European nation state that neutered Russia's own revolution. Which leads me to my final and most important lesson.

3. The State Itself is a Very Fragile and Illusory Construct, Especially in Post-Colonial Territories:

After decades of building one of the largest and most heavily armed war machines in the Middle East, Assad's Baathist regime crumbled like sand because that is precisely what Syria is. It is not a nation, at least not by the Spenglerian definition of a people united by common cause and culture. It is a series of lines that some Englishman drew all over the map in blood after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. You cannot expect anyone who isn't a certified borderline personality to die for something so synthetic. The Islamic State was equally transparent beneath all the macho posturing which is precisely why it disintegrated beneath

the boots of one-hundred-thousand peasants and America and Israel's new and improved model can be expected to meet the same fate but only if the Syrian people give up on all this Westphalian nonsense.

The one thing that I have said from the beginning of this vexing conflict that has proven to be consistently true is that Rojava makes a far more sensible partner for the Axis of Resistance than any nation state precisely because Rojava is not just another convoluted nation state. Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned ideological leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party and the ideological inspiration behind the Rojava experiment, wisely rejected such notions along with his former creed of Marxist-Leninism as the fevered dreams of a colonialist master race. His dream was the creation of a Kurdistan united only by ideas and culture amidst a Near-East organized under a diverse federation of other stateless nations governed under their own ideas and cultures, overlapping without borders or standing armies.

This dream really isn't all that far removed from the "Islamic Internationalism" of the Ayatollah's more radical comrades who inspired militias like Hezbollah, Ansar Allah, and much of the rest of the Axis of Resistance to govern themselves in warzones devoid of state infrastructure. America and Russia both seem to agree that they would much prefer an emir to either democratic coalition, so, maybe it's time that all democratic coalitions unite around lynching the latest emir and the next twelve too.

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