

Towards an Alternative “Time of the Revolution”:

Beyond State Contestation, the Struggle for a New Syrian Everyday

Estella Carpi with Andrea Glioti

(First author) Estella Carpi: Postdoctoral Research Associate, University College London, UK
and Humanitarian Affairs Advisor at Save the Children UK.

Correspondence address:

Email: e.carpi@ucl.ac.uk; estella.carpi@gmail.com.

Current work address:

The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL
34, Tavistock Square,
Room 301, 3rd Floor, 34 Tavistock Square,
London WC1H 9EZ, UK
Mob. +44 7552580011

(Second author) Andrea Glioti: freelance journalist specialized in the Middle Eastern region, and Chief Editor of Syria Untold.

Email: glotiandrea@googlemail.com.

Current address:

101 Lavenham Road
SW185ER London, UK
Mob. +44 7535403244

Abstract

The convoluted relationship between the state and citizens in conflict-ridden Syria has often been neglected in favor of more simplistic interpretations of state actions and citizens' responses, imagined and constructed through a rigid binary of dissent and consent. This paper seeks to foreground a textured analysis of the space between citizens' outright rejection of state authority and staunch loyalty to the Asad regime. Emphasising the way the state has regulated and controlled spaces for personal aspirations and material means of survival or empowerment, it unearths how such power effects resonate differently in people's everyday lives since the crisis began. Drawing on ethnographic insights from Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Syrian Kurds in northeastern Syria, this paper advocates, first, for an understanding of state, society, and political opposition as relational processes. Secondly, it draws on Syrian intellectual Omar Aziz's theory of "time of the revolution" and "time of power" in a bid to identify the limitations of contemporary strategies of political contestation, as well as the difficulties opponents face in trying to create an everyday life other than the one engineered by the ruling state.

Keywords: Stateness; Everyday life; Technology of contestation; Syrian revolution; Syrian Kurdistan; Syrian refugees

1. Introduction

Building on literature that foregrounds contradictory representations of nationhood¹ and the fuzzy lines of demarcation between private and public, state and society, compliance and resistance,² this article inquires the layered processes of contemporary technologies of contestation in Syria, and suggests a partial explanation for their (present) failure and for a social revolution which went missing. We formulate the latter by drawing on the Foucauldian notions of “technologies of production” and “technologies of power”,³ meaning strategies that enable individuals and groups to produce and transform things and orders, and that help to shape their conduct in such a way that the ruling power is efficaciously resisted and subverted. Scholarly discussions around the difficulties and contradictions underlying the process of contesting the state and advancing revolutionary claims remain unsatisfying. Furthermore, most media accounts focusing on state (in)capacity as well as “abused theories of failing states”⁴ have progressively marginalized discussions about the muddled relationship between consent and dissent, people’s attitude of “adhesion” to power,⁵ as well as the sometimes-diverging ways in which societies and states are thought and practiced.

¹ M. Herzfeld (2004) *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York and London: Routledge).

² A. Mbembe (2001) *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); L. Wedeen (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press); L. Wedeen (2013) *Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria*, *Critical Inquiry*, 39, pp. 841-873; B. Haddad (2012) *Business Networks in Syria: the Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

³ F. Foucault, L. H. Martin et al. (1988) *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock).

⁴ C. T. Call (2008) The Fallacy of the Failed State, *Third World Quarterly*, 29 (8), pp. 1491-1507.

⁵ P. Freire (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books), p.19.

Rather than engage with the endless ways in which the Syrian state can be understood and reconceptualized in light of international scholarship, we instead investigate the controversial relationships that citizens from a variegated middle social class - who define themselves as “political opponents” and actively took part in the street protests in Syria - have sometimes continued to weave with the Syrian government in order to fulfill their personal ambitions, achievements, or, more simply, material needs. Even though here all grouped into the analytical category of “opponents”, no cohesion and homogeneity is presumed behind their will and their discourse of opposing the state, nor behind an internally articulated government power structure.⁶ The people who have been sampled are those who shared contradictory stories that connect their lives to the government, while using the “public transcript”⁷ of revolutionary politics.

This inquiry into the everyday failures of anti-state contestation nonetheless still corroborates the argument that the state—and political authority in general—is a contingent construct, one that we can acknowledge only through its power effects.⁸ This understanding of power has not, however, been well employed in the discussion of civil wars and conflicts.⁹ Notwithstanding, the state will still partially be employed in this article as a self-standing entity in reflection to the common feeling and belief of the interviewees of thinking and acting *outside of* it.

⁶ R. Hinnebusch (2011) The Ba‘th Party in Post-Ba‘thist Syria: President, Party, and the Struggle for Reform, *Middle East Critique*, 20 (2), pp. 109-125.

⁷ J. C. Scott (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

⁸ T. Mitchell (1991) The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics, *The American Political Science Review*, 85 (1), pp. 77-96.

⁹ B. Eng & J. C. Martinez (2017) Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War, *International Political Sociology*, pp. 1-18.

By drawing connections between state strategies and the intimacy of everyday social life,¹⁰ we identify in this article the terrain on which ordinary citizens continually negotiate their relationship with the state as they struggle to survive, to preserve their feeling of national belonging and sameness, of being “patriotic and rebellious at the same time”.¹¹ We illustrate these relationships by examining the narratives provided by Syrian refugees who relocated throughout Lebanon immediately after the spring 2011 uprising and the subsequent state repression, and who still claim a relationship with the state and ordinary life in Syria. We also analyze accounts collected throughout 2013 from Syrian Kurdish political opponents inhabiting the Jazira region in northeastern Syria, while war was raging at full scale in most of the country. These accounts, we argue, demonstrate the complex way local actors have come to think about the state, its repressiveness, and the regime’s survival, as a result of the uprising and the complex civil war - and regional war by proxy - that followed.¹² Even though identifying the specific reasons behind people’s choices falls outside of the scope of this article, we aim to surface people’s acts that undeliberately accommodated the power structure¹³ and ended up being ineffective in challenging domination. This points to the consistency-divide dilemma between human consciousness and practical action.¹⁴ While we will not argue that the Syrian revolution has simply been “armchaired” and turned into a mere illusion, we maintain that effectively fighting for a full liberation cannot be a gift bestowed by revolutionary leaders - who are often said to be missing in the Syrian process - but it

¹⁰ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*; Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*.

¹¹ Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, p. 91.

¹² C. Phillips (2015) Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, *Third World Quarterly*, 36 (2), pp. 357-376.

¹³ A. Bayat (2000) From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’. Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South, *International Sociology*, 15 (3), pp. 543.

¹⁴ A. Giddens (2000) *Sociology* (Oxford: Polity Press).

rather resides in “the *continuing* aspect of liberating action”.¹⁵ This article provides empirical evidence of the weak and scant character of the latter by focusing only on some segments of a vast and variegated political opposition.

In contrast to discourses about the strength or weakness of the Syrian state that get amplified in the media,¹⁶ we are interested in discussing how social opposition to the regime is produced and contradicted. Such contradictions point to unsuccessful social strategies of political contestation, as they either undermine or hamper the efforts of social movements to promote and materially create change. In this sense, the Syrian case can function as a universal paradigm of technologies of contestation in crisis. These everyday contradictory practices of contestation are inherent in the ambiguity of any political process, and influence and relate to state institutions.

In this article, we operationalize the “state effects” concept¹⁷ in the phenomenological encounter between the state and its opponents, to illustrate how the state remains both salient and elusive when we come to analyze the social processes which the state regularly governs and controls. To a certain extent, the state *becomes* such social processes. By drawing on this theoretical approach, the *de facto* ambivalence of some segments of the political opposition in the Syrian conflict is emptied of human intentions and finally tackled with radical empiricism, which suspends any ethical judgment. The epistemology that underpins (presently) failing contestation strategies reasserts the theoretical inevitability of blurring the boundary between the state and society¹⁸ and problematizes an otherwise dichotomized political scenario.

¹⁵ P. Freire (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books), p.112.

¹⁶ A. Pfeffer (2016) *ISIS Flourishes in Failed States: Syria, Iraq, Libya and Now Belgium*, *Haaretz*.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics*.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics*.

2. Everyday Life at War: The Ubiquity of “Stateness”

The state in Syria can still be viewed as a sovereign apparatus as long as it organizes and monitors health care, education, economic activities, imprisonment, and gate-keeps international aid distribution and the humanitarian agencies on the ground.¹⁹ The surviving state authority thus derives part of its capacity from welfare provision, which, as we will illustrate, is able to produce “multiple effects on people’s everyday lives”.²⁰

Although this article does not seek to illustrate how citizens’ behaviors and perceptions affect state institutions and public policy, the line between civil society and the state does not exist,²¹ nor can society and state be neatly differentiated: discussing one side of the picture simultaneously sheds light on the other side. The state, in fact, cannot maintain absolute autonomy itself,²² and should rather be described as an unbounded terrain of powers, techniques, discourses, rules, and practices.²³ Given these conditions, the Syrian state acquires indirect social meanings through the contradictory ways in which the Syrian people deal with such state techniques and in which the state attempts to preserve rules and practices in the face of an unprecedented decline of governance.

The accounts of Syrian opponents that we explore here shed light on the problematic contestation strategies that attempt to slip out of the way the Asad regime has managed and controlled everyday time and space for decades.

¹⁹ Eng & Martinez, *Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War*.

²⁰ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

²¹ B. Aretxaga (2003) *Maddening States*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 32, p. 398.

²² Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: the Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*.

²³ W. Brown (1995) *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 174.

One example of such a technology of contestation is the decision of the PYD²⁴ (Democratic Union Party) to let Syrian Kurdish citizens vote in the 2014 presidential elections exclusively in the polling stations of al-Hasake and al-Qamishli. This episode points to how alternative forms of statehood on the ground, claiming independence from the central state, have the potential to affect individual perceptions of identity. Kurds who desired to vote as Syrian citizens were thus no longer allowed to do it in their town of residence.²⁵ In this specific case, it is the emergent Kurdish authority (the *de facto* autonomous region of Western Kurdistan, named “Rojava”) that exercises actual power over people’s rights and opportunities in their own territory. It does this by inducing local citizens to perceive their own identity no longer as Syrian, but as exclusively Kurdish, whatever their political stance towards the Syrian government.

Oil resources management exemplifies the complex nature of sovereignty over economic capital in the ongoing Syrian conflict, another aspect of the fraught relationship of state and society in the country. As soon as it seized most of the oil fields in compliance with the central government’s consensus, the PYD clearly admitted the necessity of continuing to pump crude oil towards the regime’s refineries.²⁶ The central government had initially bribed several factions of the Syrian Arab opposition to protect the oil pipelines in the regime-controlled regions.²⁷ These agreements evolved into proper deals where oil was sold in return for government-

²⁴ The Syrian branch of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) led by Abdullah Ocalan.

²⁵ Local residents of Rojava mention that the Syrian government had provided them with the possibility of voting via Whatsapp for the 2014 residential elections (Informal conversation with Syrian journalist Bahzad Hamo, March 6, 2017; the news is also reported on *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, June 4, 2014, available online at: <https://goo.gl/eF8wLH>).

²⁶ A. Glioti (2013) Syrian Oil Becomes Fault Line in War, *Al Monitor*.

²⁷ Glioti, Syrian Oil Becomes Fault Line in War.

supplied electricity.²⁸ Even the so-called “Islamic State” reportedly came to terms with the Asad regime by selling oil through the regime’s middleman George Haswani, who consequently became a target of European Union sanctions in March 2015.²⁹

As Ann Stoler has argued, state power effects go far beyond geopolitical domination or economic exploitation and inequality.³⁰ Such effects “lie in the details”³¹ of everyday life. They leave room for the reproduction of state power in people’s decisions and acts and for compliance with how the state has organized and controlled time and space, which is what ultimately counts politically.³²

In this article, we analyze “everydayness” by embracing the conception of everyday life as the unique site where the encounter between the Syrian state, the protestors, and the authors takes place, rather than a cultural object that can merely be studied.³³ Furthermore, studying everydayness in relation to “stateness”—commonly meant as the ontological state of the State—is a way of understanding the impact of ideology and power on lived space, and of connecting interrelated systems that might otherwise appear to be distinct. We therefore concentrate on routines, regularities in social behaviors, and on what happens or does not happen when these “implicit rules” are broken.³⁴

²⁸ B. Hubbard, C. Krauss & E. Schmitt (2014). Rebels in Syria claim Control of Resources, *The New York Times*.

²⁹ D. Blair (2015) Oil Middlemen between Syria and ISIL is New Target for EU Sanctions, *The Telegraph*.

³⁰ A. L. Stoler, C. McGranahan & P. C. Perdue (eds) (2007) *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press).

³¹ C. Lutz (2008) Empire is in the Detail, *American Ethnologist*, 33 (4), pp. 593-611.

³² Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria.

³³ M. De Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

³⁴ J. Moran (2005) *Reading the Everyday* (London, UK: Routledge).

3. The Everydayness of State Power among Lebanon-Based Syrian Refugees

The *de facto* survival of the Syrian state has not been the result of any deliberate moral recognition of the Assad government. As empirical evidence of this, the Syrian refugees we interviewed across Lebanon from 2011 to late 2013, who came predominantly from areas dominated by the political opposition, often suggested that the Syrian government's legitimacy was practically upheld through the diplomatic actions of foreign powers. As their accounts will emphasize, Syrian citizens themselves have echoed the survival of the state through their efforts to preserve their own life chances, professional achievements, or their desire to remain legal citizens despite their aversion to the government. In a nutshell, ordinary citizens saw no other alternative than to reconstruct everyday normalcy in a time of crisis.

In this regard, an international Syrian scholar has argued that citizens were in many ways nurturing the legitimacy of the central Syrian state: "At the end of the day, I can see why the revolution hasn't exactly taken off, when some Syrian opposition people I know haven't left their government positions."³⁵ Indeed, in such a generalized authoritarian environment, leaving government-related job positions would have been an oppositional act of protest taking on a collective character.³⁶ In our conversations, some foreign supporters of revolutionaries similarly reproached Syrians who had not broken off their relations with the state. The idea that the state is

³⁵ Interview conducted in Beirut, November 2013.

³⁶ R. Leenders (2013) "Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha'ban, the Hawrani is not Hungry—We Want Freedom!": Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising, in: J. Beinun, & F. Vairel (eds) *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd revised edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), p. 255.

actually something exuding from people's banal everyday actions, although not limited to that, is certainly not new.³⁷

As a matter of fact, the Syrian central state has continued to survive thanks to its power effects, which keep creating meanings of their own, although they do not reflect citizens' interests. Such solipsism of state survival and self-recognition can be traced back to the behavioral politics of the Baath Party, especially to Hafez al-Asad's tacit policy of symbolic simulation of loyalty, rather than any actual feeling of love towards the state.³⁸ The Foucauldian politics of coercion explains this elusive and convoluted relationship between the Syrian state and Syrian citizens: people reject, but paradoxically reproduce and amplify the abuse of state authority in the structures of their everyday life. This phenomenon has been named the "intimacy of tyranny".³⁹

Dima, from Daraya, recounted that she is unable to quit her job in the Syrian government,

...since it's the only source of income for raising my child, and, once I become jobless, I'd be hopeless and futureless. I wouldn't have any dreams to realize or objectives to achieve. If I ever decide to have no state at all, I'd cease to be a person.

Dima points here to the potential of the state as a basic guarantee of "bare life",⁴⁰ the potential to control the very biology of lives, not merely territories.

³⁷ D. M. Nelson (2004) Anthropologist Discovers Legendary Two-Faced Indian! Margins, the State, and Duplicity in Postwar Guatemala, in: V. Das & D. Poole (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press), p. 138.

³⁸ Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria; Wedeen, Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria.

³⁹ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

⁴⁰ G. Agamben (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Heller-Roazen, D. (trans) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

Individuals who express dissent are not accustomed to leading their everyday lives in a heterodox way because they grew up among state narratives that narrowly defined their possibilities of “harmonious domesticity”.⁴¹ In other words, even those who exclude themselves from the state and oppose its sovereignty and authority through civil disobedience (*al- 'isian al-madani*) have become interrelated in a complex way with the state orthodoxy of territorial administration and political power.

A political member of the Syrian opposition from Afamia, now resettled in Lebanon, argued that “unlike my brother, I would still be allowed to enter Syria to see my family whenever I want.” This statement shows him clinging to an ounce of pride for not being classified as an unwanted citizen, despite his reasserted political stance against the state. This shows how the stories people tell themselves about *why* they do what they do sometimes imply common feelings of passive reconciliation to one’s state, making the material disaffiliation from the social and the political architecture of the state even more challenging. Citizens’ persistent “desire” to think of their life as institutionalized militates against simplistic interpretations of domination by—or disaffiliation from—those in power. In some circumstances, the personal engagement in explicit displays of opposition *is* contradictory. Moreover, the abovementioned episode illustrates how citizens fetishize the state, which still embodies the apotheosis of rationality⁴² despite the chaos and irrational violence that are continue to rage in Syria. The present hardships, largely caused by the Syrian government, which provokes sizable and diversely motivated dissent, tend to produce a longing for order and cohesion in individual experiences.

⁴¹ Aretxaga, *Maddening States*, p. 403.

⁴² V. Das & D. Poole (2004) *State and its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies*, in: V. Das & D. Poole (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, pp. 3-34 (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press).

It is meaningful that the controversies entangled in people's everyday lives have often been reported by our Syrian and international interlocutors as being one of the primary causes of the revolution's failure. The inevitable contradictions of everyday life have largely been branded as treacherous—a betrayal of revolutionary ideology and something people should therefore try to conceal. In fact, the complex interrelationship between the state and the everyday life of its subjects—which keeps some Syrian opponents of the regime tethered to considerations of their basic needs and aspirations rather than to the state itself—have rarely been discussed by the type of opposition commentators on whom the international media rely for regular briefings on events in Syria.⁴³

For other citizens, decision-making in relation to the state was more straightforward. A., from Khaldiyye (Homs), for instance, showed an uncompromising attitude towards the issue. He refused to pay the Asad regime's troops to cancel his military conscription (a sum of 5,000 US dollars).

Are you kidding? If I really wanted to I could earn enough here in Beirut to be able to pay for that, but... no way. I won't feed the financial sources of the state army, the one that was about to kill me when I was protesting down the streets in Homs in March 2011.

For the political opponents with whom we spoke, from a "loyalist" perspective, such existing connections between citizens in the opposition and the government—through job positions, personal favors and alike—are positive proof of a general Syrian faithfulness to their state apparatus, and of a genuine desire to live within the current ruling system. From this perspective, the survival of the state is still

⁴³ M. A. Zidan (2017) In Syria... One Massacre After Another, *Orient-News.Net*.

seen as the product of a deliberate and straightforward act of identification. Such contradictory ways of contesting the state and reshaping everyday life accordingly, together with the ambiguity of international diplomacy,⁴⁴ fed the Syrian state's passion for Hobbesian self-preservation, which has survived thus far throughout the uprising and the conflict.

In sum, people's partial reluctance to reject state institutions does not translate into voluntary acknowledgment of state authority. This is something our interviewees constantly stressed. The state can still embody sovereignty independently from the population that inhabits it when the latter is kept at the margins through discriminatory administrative practices.⁴⁵ Using the interpretative lens of the interviewees, the only possible political life that either privileged or marginalized citizens can envisage resides in the framework of surviving state effects. This does not necessarily amount to pro-active political will or emotional commitment to the state. Indeed, the interviewees motivated such contradictions with the impossibility of living an *alternative life*.

The historical ambivalence of the state⁴⁶ and of its own citizens⁴⁷ has doomed many Syrians to live with anguishing indecision, which was indeed observed in the field. As shown, the ambivalent relationship that many members of the Syrian opposition hold with the state has too quickly become the object of praise or reproach from other Syrian citizens and the so-called international community. This has prematurely aborted a deeper understanding about Syrian citizens who changeably

⁴⁴ W. Hague (2012) Syria's Asad Lost Legitimacy, *Arab Times*; J. Keating (2013) Does the US Recognize Asad as Legitimate Now? Did it Ever Not?, *The World*.

⁴⁵ Das & Poole, *State and its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Wedeen, *Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria*.

⁴⁷ Wedeen (2013: 843) has named this ambivalence "neoliberal autocracy," a condition in which the autocratic state also becomes an arena for domestic security, economic liberalization, national identity, and the imagination of a multicultural accommodation, beyond sectarian strife.

dissent or support the state's practices. These citizens cannot suddenly unlearn how to be proper subjects of the state, whether in its modern conception—as an alien and abstract authority, demanding allegiance from both governors and governed⁴⁸—and in its republican form, so to speak, as an executive entity delegated by the subjects who compose it.

We now move to examine how similar assumptions can be applied to the complex relationship between Syrian Kurdish citizens, the Syrian central state, and the emerging post-2011 state-like powers in the northeastern region, which came to fall mainly under the practical rule of the PYD.

4. The Syrian “Jazira” and Local Statehoods

Despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops from most Syrian Kurdish regions between 2012 and 2013, state employees in these areas continued to receive wages from Damascus. This was not only a “Kurdish exception”; several other regions, including ar-Raqqa, the future capital of the “Islamic State” caliphate maintained relations with the central authority, thus ensuring that teachers, Syrian Telecom staff, and other qualified employees remained on the government's payroll.⁴⁹

The case of Rakan, a Syrian Telecom employee in Ras al-‘Ayn (al-Hasakah governorate) is exemplary. Although he was a Yekiti Party member⁵⁰ and had been actively involved in anti-government demonstrations since 2011, he continued to work for the state-owned company until 2014. He could not afford to quit his job and

⁴⁸ T. Asad (2004) Where are the Margins of the State?, in: V. Das & D. Poole (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press), p. 281.

⁴⁹ M. Winsor (2015) ISIS Threatens Teachers in Raqqa: College Graduates, Educators in Syrian City Forced to Repent, Teach in Islamic State Schools, *International Business Times*.

⁵⁰ C. Sinclair & S. Kajjo (2011) The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria, *Middle East Research and Information Project*.

raise his three children, given the critical economic situation. In 2013, he was summoned by one of the Syrian intelligence branches, which had probably been informed of the fact that he was hosting a Western journalist. Rakan was torn about whether he should answer their call and face possible detention, or ignore it and risk losing his job. In order to resolve this ethical dilemma, the Western journalist (a co-author of the present paper) asked to be received by a high-ranking official of the PYD in al-Qamishli to request that he mediate with Syrian state authorities on the ground. The PYD official responded that there was nothing he could do, as he was himself exposed to potential arrest and had no sway on the central state apparatus. Rakan eventually quit his job in 2014, but only after he had decided to migrate to Turkey.

This ethnographic account demonstrates the incapacity of the PYD official to protect Rakan or to provide him with an alternative job, confirming that the Asad regime's administrative sovereignty had not been completely eroded and that the state was still able to affect the ability of citizens to sustain their livelihoods and ensure their personal safety. Rakan only stopped being economically dependent on the central government—and consequently subject to its repressive agencies—when he got out of “liberated” Rojava. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Kurdish regions between 2012 and 2013, the PYD has gradually sought to replace the central government as a major employer and to reduce the massive exodus that ensued after the crisis.⁵¹

On the one hand, the Kurdish party has been successful thus far in asserting its local governance in several ways. For instance, it has gained profits from smuggling goods and people, it has been able to guarantee the distribution of basic services, and,

⁵¹ W. Van Wilgenburg (2015) Syrian Kurdish Parties: Don't Go to Europe, *Al-Jazeera English*.

in 2013, it was able to put the newly formed security forces (*Asaiysh*) and the embryonic army (known as the YPG) on its payroll, as many of our interlocutors confirmed. On the other hand, the PYD's capabilities are still far from successfully replacing the official Syrian state as a major employer in the territory in which the PYD holds *de facto* statehood. The Syrian government has, in fact, continued to perform as a state by providing welfare. Welfare provision has long been a key element in counter-insurgency strategies and, above all, a strategy for signaling to civilians that the state continues to exert power.⁵²

Another aspect of continuity in official state power is that citizens who have been heavily subjected to the harshness of the Syrian security agencies have often been forced to look for job opportunities in governmental institutions. 31-year-old Tawfiq, for instance, had been politically active as a member of Mazen Darwish's Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression in Damascus. He endured detention and torture as a result. In 2013, when he returned to his hometown al-Malakiyyah, he was jobless despite his qualifications as teacher of Arabic and the local language Kurmanji,⁵ which, unlike the past,⁵³ is now partially allowed in Syrian official schools. He had no other choice but to travel back to Damascus and look for a job in the national universities.

Education thus constitutes a further sector of everyday life in which the power of the Asad regime remains ubiquitous for Syrians, even when they are hostile to it. As illustrated above, numerous university students stopped attending their courses due to the ongoing conflict. But in the absence of alternatives to the state education system, they found themselves compelled either to return to Baathist education or to

⁵² Eng & Martinez, *Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War*.

⁵³ A. Rabo (2011) *Conviviality and Conflict in Contemporary Aleppo*, *Religious Minorities in the Middle East*, 108, pp. 123-147.

migrate overseas when feasible.⁵⁴ Sheykhmous, a 21-year-old chemistry student, remained in ad-Darbasiyyah for a year in the hope that the situation would improve in government-controlled Latakia, where he had enrolled before the war. He eventually decided, in late 2013, to resume his studies in Latakia. Sheyhmous affirmed: “I don’t want either to get stuck in ‘Amuda at my family’s house or migrate to Iraqi Kurdistan, which seems to me a much more conservative society where Syrians are discriminated against.” He eventually took part in a university military camp, an educational experience typically promoted in Baathist political doctrine.

Like most residents of ‘Amuda, Sheykhmous had participated in anti-government demonstrations in 2011 and 2012. Although he was hardly a supporter of the regime, he nonetheless prioritized his education in a government institution, feeling he could not wait for the PYD to gain sufficient traction in their state-building efforts to provide education independently. At the time of writing, the local Kurdish authorities still have not established educational institutions for the local population. Indeed, high school exams are still held in al-Qamishli, which leads to a practical recognition of the central state’s exclusive authority for the validation of students’ official results.

‘Alaa, a twenty-five-year-old medical student enrolled at Aleppo University, emphasized to us that she returned to her hometown of ‘Amuda because of the security situation, and that the move had meant “unlearning English and hard work in the family vegetable garden.” ‘Alaa had no ambition to become a peasant and was still hoping to return to Aleppo at some stage. On the basis of the ethnographic accounts we collected, few of those who returned to their studies in governmental institutions would recognize the regime’s authority over their political lives. They no

⁵⁴ A. Glioti (2013) Syrian War Keeps University Students at Home, *Al Monitor*.

longer experienced state-structured social life as “natural” in the wake of the popular uprisings. Their pragmatic choices were clearly dictated by the limited options available for completing their education. This demonstrates the *de facto* survival of central state education, though certainly not the survival of the state as a “repository of symbolic power”⁵⁵ from the perspective of our interviewees.

While most students fell into this situation of *de facto* reliance on the regime, a small proportion of educated youth, staunch supporters of the PYD, decided to quit their studies and defend their “liberated” homeland (Rojava). A female YPJ⁵⁶ fighter in her late twenties in a military training camp next to al-Qamishli told us that “I quit the university to join the *guerrillas* once I realized that everything I had been taught until then was wrong.” Like all other female fighters, she attended the PYD’s political classes. For the majority of university students, this was the only option available in Rojava apart from returning to national schools.

In response to the breakdown or wavering of institutional structures, individuals and groups attempt to maintain some kind of social order. In such precarious conditions, local people perceived any sort of effective stateness on the ground as a guarantee of social order. “You couldn’t imagine what’s going on in the Deir az-Zor area, controlled by Arab rebels ... a son killed his father in a dispute over the profits of their oil well,” said an Arab truck driver upon his return from those regions. “Freedom has unleashed the worst human behavior,” was the comment of a middle-aged teacher from ‘Amuda, stressing the way locals reacted to the withdrawal of the regime’s armed forces. Shirin, a 38-year-old nurse who used to commute for work likewise reported that, “I had to argue with the bus driver to reactivate the old

⁵⁵ M. Loveman (1998) The Modern State and the Primitive Accumulation of Symbolic Power, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 110, pp. 1679.

⁵⁶ The YPG women’s branch.

fare to reach al-Qamishli from ‘Amuda... he had doubled it in just two days!’ She protested, asking, “Do you want me to spend my whole salary on transportation!?” Indeed, war profiteering has ballooned in Rojava as it has elsewhere in Syria. Bus drivers, smugglers, and shopkeepers alike justify increased prices by blaming the tax levy enforced by the armed factions on the passage of goods.

In these accounts, the everyday ethics of justice appear highly individualized, as much as the practices of justice become arbitrary. Justice, hence, no longer represents a desirable condition of compensation and equity, but rather a constellation of subjective interpretations⁵⁷ that are constantly being contested by others who inhabit the same social space. The “jungle” of individual interests that comes to the fore during wartime reinforces the collective illusion that order can only be guaranteed by an unwavering state. The abstract idea of the state that people maintain masks the real power relations underlying what is called “public interest”.⁵⁸ As a result, expressions of regret and hopelessness were easily identifiable in the field: “I swear we had a better life when the regime was in power! You didn’t have to pay all this money for a kilo of tomatoes,” *Yade*⁵⁹ Mahwosh used to proclaim every time we were about to sit for lunch in ‘Amuda.

In these accounts, collected in Lebanon among Syrians and in Syrian Kurdistan, people’s acts and choices – which would be better explained by employing methods and goals other than the ones of the present study - are somehow *produced* rather than merely *constrained* by the state.⁶⁰ However, a group of our interlocutors, all defining themselves as political dissidents of the Asad regime despite the diversity

⁵⁷ D. Poole (2004) *Between Threat and Guarantee: Justice and Community in the Margins of the Peruvian State*, in: Das, V. and Poole, D. (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press), pp. 60-61.

⁵⁸ Aretxaga, *Maddening States*, p. 400.

⁵⁹ *Yade* means “mother” in Kurmanji, or Northern Kurdish.

⁶⁰ Mitchell, *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics*.

of their experiences, still tended to argue that the popular resistance's purposes come from *outside* and not *within* the realm of the state. The resistance to the state has therefore grown within the state-generated moral universe and its social processes, when considered under the structural effect that the state itself emanates. Moreover, the “public transcript”⁶¹ of the revolution back in 2011 has repeatedly tried to disguise the actual scantiness, or even absence, of everyday revolutionary acts in their intimate lives, in the intention to purport the dissent performance as a holistic way of living. Not even the “infrapolitics” of some⁶² – resistance that does not openly declare its intentions in times of domination - always turns into political action, let alone into revolutionary politics. The unacceptability of this analytical view on the part of the interviewees created an epistemological tension between the anti-state sentiments of our interviewees—which tended to depict the state as a self-standing entity, clearly separated from Syrian society—and the authors' perception of the citizen-state relationship.

If technologies of contestation are in crisis among Syrians, it is not because they feel a moral collective sense of being a whole (“sameness”), which can be there but in heterogeneous forms and that, to some extent, constitutes the official habitus of Syrian nationhood. Rather, the cause of the crisis is the inevitability of state architecture in everyday life, which exercises control and surveillance over social space, and the historical impossibility of opening laboratories for alternative forms of protest, which rely on historically young “repertoires of contention”.⁶³

⁶¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, p. 23.

⁶² Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, p. 201.

⁶³ Leenders, “Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha’ban, the Hawrani is not Hungry—We Want Freedom!”: Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising, p. 246.

The feeling of sameness was reflected in the flowers that the revolutionaries used to throw at the soldiers in the street protests.⁶⁴ It was further reasserted by some Syrian anti-interventionist opponents when the specter of invasion and intervention was raised at the time of the potential US strike in the wake of the chemical attacks of August 2013. Against the backdrop of sameness, and resonating with the epistemological tension between the authors and the interviewees, opponents referred to the Asad regime as a “foreign creature”,⁶⁵ and the state presence as an “occupation” (*ihtilal*), a comparative allusion to the Israeli occupation in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

5. Technologies of Contestation in Crisis: What Alternatives to a State-Shaped Everyday?

To illustrate how individual decisions have accidentally complicated the revolutionary process, we will utilize the theories of Syrian activist Omar Aziz,⁶⁶ usually labeled an intellectual anarchist by contemporary Syrian activists. Back in 2011, Aziz founded the first local committee in Barzeh, a district on the periphery of Damascus. Aziz’s thinking identifies a lack of synergy between popular revolutionary activity and people’s everyday life. By identifying the failures of the contemporary phenomenologies of protest—which cut across “Eastern” and “Western” societies—he showed how sterile and harmful it was to remain embedded within the authoritarian structures of the Syrian state while advocating and struggling for its

⁶⁴ L. Sinjab (2012) Darayya Death Shock Syrians, *BBC*.

⁶⁵ Leenders “Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha’ban, the Hawrani is not Hungry—We Want Freedom!”: Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising, p. 258.

⁶⁶ O. Aziz (2013) *Sous le Feu des Snipers. La Révolution de la Vie Quotidienne. Programme des Comités Locaux de Coordination de Syrie* (Paris: Éditions Antisociales).

departure. In this regard, Aziz,⁶⁷ who died in the Syrian regime's prisons in 'Adra, theorized that it was possible to identify the "time of the revolution" (*zaman ath-thawra*) and the "time of power" (*zaman as-sulta*).

Aziz meant for the "time of the revolution" to permeate every aspect of people's everyday life in order to be successful. The establishment of self-governing local councils—*majalis mahalliya*—was meant to give birth to a pragmatic alternative to the Asad apparatus. These councils arranged the autonomous distribution of food and goods, turned houses into hospitals, and made the civil resistance an actual societal reality by acting outside of state institutions.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Aziz was aware that people would not have immediately felt confident about a hypothetical non-state (and anti-state) ruling power and provision of basic services, because it would have no historical reference in Syria. Furthermore, citizens' mistrust of one another "cancels out the possibility of any more promising form of collective action than opting for a solution that maintains the status quo".⁶⁹

Aziz envisioned a future Syrian society in which civil society and the military would coordinate. The military, at that time identified exclusively as the heterogeneous entity of the Free Syrian Army, would support civil efforts logistically and in terms of domestic security. A horizontal coordination would take place between all of the popular committees—*tansiqiyyat*—which cover different geographical regions and aim to mobilize the population politically. Immersing people's everyday life in temporary alternative state structures, would make it easier to boycott the official structures of statehood: by refusing to pay utility bills and

⁶⁷ Aziz, *Sous le Feu des Snipers. La Révolution de la Vie Quotidienne. Programme des Comites Locaux de Coordination de Syrie.*

⁶⁸ Aziz, *Sous le Feu des Snipers. La Révolution de la Vie Quotidienne. Programme des Comites Locaux de Coordination de Syrie.*

⁶⁹ Wedeen, *Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria*, pp. 865.

organizing a general strike, for example. In the absence of an alternative structure of monitoring and protection able to guarantee service provision, citizens cannot envisage any other possibilities for asserting their social, cultural, and political persona in everyday life—and, sometimes, even their survival. Consequently, the revolution, in the first instance, should be conducted through a technology of contestation that is deployed in alternative spaces and during an alternative time in order to trigger concrete changes in the subsequent transitory stages.

In his writings, Aziz blurs the divisions between social classes in Syrian society, which have been increasingly heightened alongside confessional fractures by the Asad regime's politics of community division and alienation.⁷⁰ In this sense, Aziz differs from Engels' theory—as mentioned in Lenin's *The State and Revolution*⁷¹—in that the German theorist hypothesized that only the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat would be able to dismantle the central state as a special coercive force. Conversely, social class is not considered in the revolutionary political project Aziz wanted to prioritize. For Aziz, the only possible transitory “free people's state”⁷² is formed by local committees and councils. He never mentions what should be edified after the victory of the revolutionary process: whether the state *per se* should “wither away” (that is, what Engels was advocating for in his referral to the “bourgeois state”) and end with the Asad dynasty; or whether, by contrast, a new liberal and democratic state can emerge from the revolutionary committees and councils. Overall, the extent to which the ultimate goal of “Azizism” was the once-for-all disappearance of the state remains uncertain, in particular if we consider statehood as a network—which

⁷⁰ L. Trombetta (2013) *Siria. Dagli Ottomani agli Asad. E Oltre* (Milan: Edizioni Mondadori Università).

⁷¹ V. I. Lenin (1918) *The State and Revolution. The Marxist Theory of the State & the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, *Collected Works*, 25, pp. 381-492.

⁷² In the 1970s the German Social Democrats often used to resort to this expression.

the committees in the Syrian revolution could have formed more strongly—rather than a self-standing organism⁷³ or a mere site of struggle.⁷⁴ In this regard, however, other Syrian intellectuals have taken over where Aziz left off. Going beyond the empirical form of the state and its capacities to perform power, others have emphasized the need to identify and support a post-Asadist future built by a new Syrian majority,⁷⁵ by working concertedly against the “Asadist confiscation of the public sphere”.⁷⁶

Yet, media discourses and news-making produce the idea of a chronic and irresolvable emergency, thus catastrophizing political life in Syria.⁷⁷ Such discourses of catastrophization trigger ordinary people’s sense of fidelity to the classical idea of the state and its domestic legitimacy, even when state security and power strategies are pushed far beyond democratic standards. That fidelity is a product of the common belief that anything is better than the current violence and an unknown future, in which new unpredictabilities and strategies of violence would be faced.

The present phenomenon of the catastrophization of Syrian society and politics has further fed the *de facto* survival of governmental sovereignty in the international arena, and, according to the interviewed political opponents, is one of the main factors that undermined the possibility for the Syrian opposition to create a coordinated network of administrative actors and self-sufficiently provide welfare to citizens. Similarly, such a network would have left room for the more efficiently

⁷³ G. Deleuze & F. Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Massumi, B. (trans) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 385.

⁷⁴ L. Althusser (1971) *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Notes towards an Investigation, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Mon. Rev. Press), pp. 127-186.

⁷⁵ According to Syrian intellectual Yasin al-Haj Saleh, the fact that the international community has not actively worked towards the delineation of this potential Syrian majority and a post-Asadist future is in fact an object of condemnation. The divide-and-rule sectarian strategies of the regime, in addition to a widespread sectarian aetiology of Syrian society and crisis have further impeded such support.

⁷⁶ Y. Al-Haj Saleh (2016) Majoritarian Syria. Justice in Conflict Resolution, *Al-Jumhuriya.net*.

⁷⁷ A. Y. Vazquez-Arroyo (2013) How Not to Learn From Catastrophe: Habermas, Critical Theory, and the “Catastrophization of Political Life,” *Political Theory*, 41(5), p. 748.

“revolutionary” everyday life that Aziz was theorizing and attempting to construct by departing from the first experimental committee in Barzeh. It would have offered an alternative to the everydayness produced by the state, creating the possibility of reforming the anti-state technology of protest from within.

6. Conclusion

Aziz’s theories and, in general, the domestic theorization of alternative forms of statehood have too often gone unheeded in the interpretation of the Syrian crisis. On the one hand, the so-called state apparatus,⁷⁸ conceived as separated from the empirical reality it produces, still serves as a discursive strategy to refer to the Asad regime’s ownership of resources and infrastructures in the face of multiple forms of social discontent and impoverishment. It has reflects our interviewees’ idea of thinking and acting *outside of* the central state. On the other—as the present article has sought to demonstrate—the state takes shape in society in a fluid and reciprocal manner; society is also a paradoxical reproduction of state strategies. In sum, society itself is the result of a mutual structural penetration.

The conflicted relationships between dissident citizens and the central state, as much as the supposedly simple binary between popular dissent and consent, requires a phenomenological epistemology. Indeed, there can be no clear-cut distinction between what inherently constitutes the state and what gives rise to an imaginary freestanding “civil society,” as both can only be observed as a network of practices and relationships⁷⁹ through which the socio-political order struggles to be maintained.

⁷⁸ Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Notes towards an Investigation*.

⁷⁹ Mitchell, *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics*; T. Mitchell (2006) *Society, Economy and the State Effect*, in: A. Gupta & A. Sharma (eds) *The Anthropology of the State: a Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 169-186.

This raises the importance of recognizing the complex articulation between how we think about state and society and how we can actually observe them in their empirical processes and practices.

This paper has argued against analyses based on the notion of self-standing statehood, which fails to adequately capture the reality of statehood as practiced in everyday life. Instead, it has tried to foreground how the state is incorporated into the thinking and actions of individual citizens.⁸⁰ In this framework, our ethnographic insights have exposed the way the state empirically manifests itself in daily life. Statehood—and not only “stateness,” that is, the ontological condition of the State—is itself a phenomenological process, not an entity. As such, it can still be spoken of as a network, a complex terrain where controversial processes, desires, practices, and policies intertwine.

Even though it is not ontologically possible to delineate where the state begins and society ends, opposing processes and intentions can be identified in such networks. In this regard, this paper has addressed how the actions of individual citizens have practically complied with the state strategies, despite the citizens’ explicit desire to oppose the state. Several material factors explain how this micro-reproduction of state power in people’s lives is still in effect in Syria: the central state’s continued ownership of the ports and other points of access to Lebanon; the state’s capacity to provide an acceptable level of service to a relatively populated area of Syria; the state’s ability to pay civil servants; the state’s interest in keeping national schools and universities open in areas ruled by the Asad regime (these institutions are therefore not targeted by government shelling).

⁸⁰ J. P. Nettl (1968) The State as a Conceptual Variable, *World Politics*, 20, pp. 577.

The emergence of multiple statehoods—negotiating, overlapping with, and fighting each other—which the PYD political experience is revealing in northerneastern Syria—can therefore be described as a complex political phenomenon. The citizens, whether defined as hardliners or willing to compromise, are not simply restricted by political totalitarianism. Instead, they reproduce and respond to the forms of power they experience on an everyday basis. We have tried to explain the undesired reproduction of state strategies and desires in the intimate forms of everyday life⁸¹ in light of an empirical lack of viable, alternative forms of everydayness. This had led to the temporary failure of political opponents to boycott the forms of everydayness that have been produced by the central state. By this token, our interviewees’ intimate and public transcripts of politics represent the exact opposite of the “quiet encroachment of the subaltern”.⁸²

In conclusion, the emerging statehood of the PYD, the central state, and popular resistance can only be described as hybrid terrains of mutually conditioned practices. The Syrian state and its rival (or occasionally allied) statehoods have been reconsidered here as political processes rather than separate entities. Citizens, too, we have viewed as a product of the contradictory relations that they weave with the surviving or emerging statehoods on the ground. Popular resistance is also formed *within* state-related networks.⁸³

While the international focus on state failure or state survival has failed to unearth, explain, and value the actual actions of citizens, new avenues for practicing everyday dissent still need to be suggested in Syria and worldwide. The current

⁸¹ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

⁸² Bayat, From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’. Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South.

⁸³ Mitchell, *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics*; Mitchell, *Society, Economy and the State Effect*.

political process in Syria becomes an international paradigm for contestation in crisis, which can be faced and challenged only if the state and practices of resistance are thought and approached as relational political processes.

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