

Syria Is Burning, But What Fuels the Fire?

July 22, 2016

Syria is the focus of the world's attention. However, the closer the lens is focused, the more the picture seems obscured. Is what we are seeing a revolution? Is it a proxy war by international forces? Or, especially now with the emergence of the Islamic State, is this Islamic authoritarianism asserting itself? These questions are vital for anyone trying to piece together a picture of what is happening and especially for activists trying to understand what is at stake in Syria and what attitude to take toward events as they unfold.

Two recent books shed some light on the tragedy and struggle in Syria. Michael Griffin's *Islamic State* is a summary account of the rise of Daesh, the Arabic acronym by which ISIS has come to be known. On the other hand, with *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami attempt to tell the story of the Syrian revolution from below. Between the two books a picture emerges of a country torn by revolution and counter-revolution, which is at the same time the focal point of foreign intervention. The living reality of the Syrian conflict is contradictory, defying simple characterization.

Michael Griffith's *The Islamic State* charts the rise of Daesh during the last decade and a half. The story he tells is of a cadre of Islamic revolutionaries, hardened and shaped by repression in the jails of Middle East regimes and American occupation. As Griffin states, "One theme that runs through IS like a golden thread is jail-time." Daesh has its origins in the wreckage of Iraq left by the United States' invasion of 2003. It was U.S. prisons such as Camp Bucca that provided the initial recruiting ground of Islamist militants. Borrowing a page from domestic prison administration, U.S. forces relied on prisoners' own forms of organization to keep order. In this case it was the radical Islamists who divided the prison into compounds ruled by mayors, or emirs. According to Griffin, "With tacit U.S. approval, the emirs transformed Camp Bucca into a vast center of indoctrination and training" (3). The caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and thousands of other Islamist recruits emerged from this crucible as an organized political force.

In the initial period of American occupation, the Islamist groups were led by Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda leader sent by Osama bin Laden to command the operation in Iraq. Their struggle was directed against two opponents: the American occupation forces and the Shi'a political parties. Al-Qaeda in Iraq posed as the true Sunni resistance and recruited widely in the "Sunni Triangle" of Anbar province. As Griffin points out, this trend was only arrested by the Sahwa, or Awakening, movement of 2007 in which "former tribal members of the Iraqi army and the AQI were paid to guard the very same infrastructure they had once sought to sabotage" (23). While U.S. politicians and media discussed the success of the "surge" in troop deployment by the Bush administration, the real decline in violence was due to this temporary paying off of al-Qaeda's Sunni constituency. The conflict was not permanently arrested, and the breakdown opened up new possibilities for the Islamist forces.

Islamism in Syria traces its roots to the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Like Iraq, Syria was ruled by an Arab-nationalist party, the Ba'ath Party. The Syrian regime waged a relentless war against the Muslim Brotherhood culminating in the massacre of 20,000 in the Brotherhood stronghold of Hama in 1982. Thousands of Islamist militants spent decades in prison for organizing against the regime. According to Griffin, the prisons of Syria were the same sort of Islamist recruiting centers that the U.S. prisons in Iraq had inadvertently established. For example, "Sednaya prison ... was a cruel, brutalizing, and disciplined academy for veterans of Hama and Syrians returning from the Iraqi jihad" (45).

Islamist organizations found an unexpected ally in Bashar al-Assad himself in the first days of the Syrian revolution. The revolution was initially coordinated by ad hoc “Local Coordinating Committees.” As Griffin notes, “In a move of Machiavellian ingenuity ... Assad sowed dragon’s teeth among the LCCs with a pardon that released 1,500 convicted Islamist extremists from Sednaya and other political prisons into a turbulent society” (45). The Islamists via their foreign contacts began to amass weapons and came to dominate the military struggle that engulfed the Syrian revolution. The ad hoc militias formed by the LCCs could hardly compete with Islamists who had access, for example, to the nearly three billion dollars sent by Qatar to Islamist militias.

Daesh emerged from a convergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamist militias in Syria. Al-Baghdadi, after assuming command of Jabhat al-Nusra, broke with al-Qaeda’s strategy of simply waging war against the perceived enemies of Islam. The Islamic State in the Levant, or Daesh, transitioned from terrorism to state formation in the territory between Syria and Iraq. A coherent narrative of Sunni-Shi’a regional warfare is reinforced by the fact that the Shi’a Islamic Republic of Iran supports al-Assad and maintains important links with the Shi’a political parties of Iraq. Daesh recruited its forces from the brutalized Sunni populations of both countries who were seeking a means to resist their respective tormentors.

Griffin shows his limits when he inadvertently touches on historical or political matters beyond the scope of his journalistic account. At times, Griffin presents Syria’s sectarian conflict as a matter-of-fact product of its “patchwork of faiths” (43) without mentioning that these divisions were inscribed in the functioning Syrian state by French imperialism. Griffin’s characterization of Islamist politics also tends towards caricature, describing it as a virus or cancer rather than a political ideology with human motivations. Regardless, in its short 163 pages, *The Islamic State: Rewriting History* is a wealth of essential facts about the rise of Daesh, written in a fast-paced journalistic style.

Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami is a much more ambitious project. With this book, the authors have made it a goal to translate firsthand accounts of grassroots revolutionaries to the page. In telling the story this way, Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami show us revolution and counter-revolution intertwined in the pragmatic choices of desperate people. Overall, the authors aim to show one important fact, often obscured by the violence—that there is a revolution from below in Syria, and it still lives and breathes in spite of everything else.

Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami take us into the streets where in February 2011, inspired by the examples of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, crowds gathered to ask the fateful question “Why not us?” (46). The axis around which the story revolves is the emergence of the local councils, or *tanseefiyat*. The councils were composed of “just five or seven full-time revolutionaries in each neighborhood, working in total secrecy, but linked up to other networks throughout the city” (57). The committees mobilized people for protests, documented the regime’s abuses, and organized strikes in marketplaces and universities. Organized through voluntary association and selected by the danger of repression, the committees were the backbone of the popular revolution.

While the revolution spread with the spontaneous force of self-activity, the conscious intervention of revolutionary activists was necessary to build the councils. In this capacity, the authors point to the actions of the 63-year-old anarchist activist Omar Aziz, who returned to Syria from overseas following the 2011 protests and sparked the movement to form councils. Aziz was arrested in 2012 and died under conditions of torture in the regime’s prison cells. However, the councils spread across Syria and, according to Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, remain the means of organizing mutual aid and protest to this day. The problem for the councils, expressed by one activist, is that “we needed money to survive. ... Those with money—the Muslim Brotherhood and other Syrians outside—also had agendas” (61).

In addition to the local councils, Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami also describe the emergence of autonomous communities in the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria, now known collectively as Rojava. The Kurdish cantons have seen the emergence of directly elected communal councils inspired by Democratic Union Party (PYD) linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However in this respect, the authors cast some doubts on the goals of the PYD. According to Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, “in the Kurdish regions, the revolutionary process was more top-down and party-led than elsewhere” (74). In spite of the much-romanticized direct democracy of Rojava, the PYD “maintains ultimate control over the canton-level councils” (74). Like everything in the Syrian revolution, Rojava and the Kurdish struggle are shot through with contradictions.

The rise of the Islamist militias is directly linked to the limits imposed by militarization on the grassroots struggle. According to Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, Islamism flourished in the militias “and there were concrete reasons for this to do with arms supply, funding, and discipline” (109). Fighting groups initially formed by outraged Syrians who wanted to retaliate against the regime’s brutality were slowly enrolled in and reshaped by Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. The logic of these Syrian fighters is given in a quote from activist Basel al-Junaidi who states, “They were respected as strong, well-trained soldiers, so people—including secularists like us—decided to tolerate them until the regime had gone” (127). As the conflict deepened, this logic took over and fueled the rise of Daesh.

Unlike Griffin, Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami interrogate the social motivations of ISIS militants engaged in state-building. In the brutality of war and revolution, ISIS’s rule can seem like a new year zero for those who want to start over. Under ISIS, “the rich, the notable families, and all the political parties are rendered irrelevant” (138). As the authors state, “ISIS has little popular support in Syria—but it does have some and it may be growing” (138). This Syrian base is magnified and reinforced by the influx of international fighters who are making Syria a battleground for Islamism, as Afghanistan was in the late 1970s during the Soviet occupation.

In Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami have produced an excellent work of political journalism from below. The book is a chorus of voices, from those who built the initial grassroots councils of 2011, to the Syrians who did jail time under ISIS’ rule. In just over 200 pages, a wealth of stories and anecdotes illuminates the realities of the Syrian situation and prove the authors’ point that a popular revolution began in 2011, and its consequences are still being felt in spite of the horrors of the war.

Syria is burning and the fires are fueled by the ongoing struggle that has produced an experience of self-organization on the part of the insurgent population. At the same time, all of these events have produced untold suffering, the deaths of hundreds of thousands, and the dislocation of millions of refugees. We can only hope with Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami that “there is reason to hope that when the bombs finally stop falling, when ISIS and regime checkpoints no longer threaten death, these people will return and raise their voices again for a better future” (220).