



COVID-19 AND THE SYRIAN REGIME

AN OPPORTUNITY TO TIGHTEN ITS AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL OVER SOCIETY

- The Syrian regime has handled the COVID-19 pandemic with a combination of opacity and repression. While the crisis has reasserted the centrality of the state and its institutions, their capacities are diminishing. To compensate for this shortfall in the areas under its control, and to manifest its authority, the regime has utilised its various clientelist networks. Through charitable institutions and networks of businessmen and Baath Party affiliates, resources are provided along partisan, sectarian, and tribal lines in an effort to consolidate the regime's authority and control society.
- As COVID-19 has deepened Syria's socioeconomic crisis, Damascus' attempts to dominate society - if only passively - have not quite succeeded. Criticism of the central authorities and their policies is being publicly expressed, even in areas under the regime's control. While the regime owes much of its resilience to its foreign allies, various political and socioeconomic factors continue to challenge its attempts to create the conditions needed to stabilize its power.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease in Syria in March 2020 prompted the Syrian authorities to launch hygiene campaigns and impose measures affecting the everyday life of the public, including curfews and night-time travel bans between cities and their surrounding countryside between the hours of 6pm and 6am each day.¹ At the start of May, the authorities began easing these measures. The travel ban between cities and the countryside was lifted; government and banking services gradually returned; and commercial and industrial shops and services were allowed to operate once again between the hours of 8am and 5pm.² On 31 May, the government officially ended the curfew, while adopting a plan to reimpose it if necessary. All tourism and entertainment sites, including parks and restaurants, were reopened, and all public sector institutions resumed their activities at normal levels starting 1 June.

Throughout this whole time period, the pandemic was—and still is—handled by the authorities with a combination of opacity and repression.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated once again the centrality of the state and its institutions in Syria, it has also been an opportunity for the regime to reassert and consolidate its authority and authoritarianism in the areas under its control, which now comprise over 70 percent of Syrian territory. It has shown that the state and its institutions are not the only instruments with which the regime may strengthen its power and authoritarianism; it has also utilized various networks of power, based on clientelist, sectarian, partisan, and tribal relations, in order to mobilize at the popular level.

To analyze how Damascus is attempting to strengthen its domination of those living in its areas of control, this article will examine the means and tools used to enforce its power, which are rooted in the regime's patrimonial nature.³ The regime relies mostly on coercion, which includes—but is not limited to—repressive action and the instilling of fear. Its attempts to impose forms of passive hegemony—in other words, the passivity, or at least non-active opposition, of large sections of the population under its control—require different tools in parallel with repression.

At the same time, Damascus has faced significant challenges in pursuing this objective, for various economic and political reasons. COVID-19 has intensified Syria's socioeconomic problems, which

were already severe: over 85 percent of Syrians were estimated to be in poverty even prior to the pandemic.⁴ COVID-19 has paralyzed whole sectors of the economy, such as tourism, transport, and construction,⁵ while salaries in some private sector companies had been reduced by at least 25 percent at the end of March (Economy 2Day 2020).

This deepening socioeconomic crisis has nurtured forms of political dissent and criticism in various parts of the country, as witnessed in Sweida in January 2020, where demonstrations denounced the poor living conditions and “neglect by the Syrian government of its citizens” (Enab Baladi 2020). Other regions re-captured by the regime from opposition fighters in recent years, such as Daraa and Eastern Ghouta, have suffered continuous and intense campaigns of repression in addition to socioeconomic problems.

1. State Institutions

State institutions remain central for the vast majority of the population under the Syrian government's control. Despite budgetary restrictions and the destruction caused by the war, they remain the primary provider of essential public services. Despite continuous austerity measures and reductions of subsidies for most products and services,⁶ state-owned public agencies are still the main providers of essentials such as bread, subsidized fuel, healthcare, and education. For example, the Syrian Trade Establishment (STE)—a state institution with stores selling food and other products at low cost across the country—is critically important for sectors of the population that cannot afford to buy similar merchandise from private stores. Yet the protection they provide is far from sufficient, with the government controlling only 20 percent of the market share for goods, while the remaining 80 percent is controlled by private actors.⁷

by the political power, to amass considerable fortunes. In addition to the patrimonial nature of the state, and reinforcing this pattern, was the rentier characteristic of many of the states of the region, including Syria. Rent is defined as a regular revenue not generated by work carried out or commissioned by the beneficiary. Therefore, most of the patrimonial states in the MENA region are generally characterized by a deeply corrupt, trilateral “power elite,” as explained by Achcar (2016: 7) as follows: “[A] ‘triangle of power’ constituted by the interlocking pinnacles of the military apparatus, the political institutions and a politically determined capitalist class (a state bourgeoisie), all three bent on fiercely defending their access to state power, the main source of their privileges and profits.”

1. At the start of the holy month of Ramadan, in late April, the curfew was amended to last from 7:30pm until 6am from Sunday to Thursday, and from 12pm to 6am on Fridays and Saturdays.

2. The government continued to prohibit certain activities, including weddings, condolences, bazaars, seminars, exhibitions, Internet cafes, children's playgrounds, private sports clubs, cinemas, private and public theaters, popular parks, restaurants, cafes, and nightclubs.

3. Gilbert Achcar (2013) points to the patrimonial nature of the Syrian regime's apparatus, in which the centers of power (politics, the military, and the economy) are concentrated in one family and its clique (namely, the Assads), similar to Libya and the Gulf monarchies. Thus, the regime was pushed to use all the violence at its disposal to protect its rule. Achcar describes the patrimonial state in the traditional Weberian definition as an absolute autocratic and hereditary power, which can function through a collegial environment (i.e., parents and friends), and which owns the state: its armed force, dominated by a praetorian guard (a force whose allegiance is to the rulers, not to the state); economic means; and administration. In this type of regime, a form of crony capitalism develops, dominated by a state bourgeoisie. In other words, people close to the ruling families often exploit their dominant position, guaranteed

4. For more on the general macro socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, see Joseph Daher (2020), “‘Before Corona, I will die of hunger’: The socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 on the Syrian population and new challenges for the regime,” MED Direction Blog, <https://bit.ly/3d3D0L2>

5. Economic losses were estimated at around 1 trillion SYP (approximately \$830 million, assuming an exchange rate of 1,200 SYP/\$) per month from March 2020 by Damascus University's Professor Ali Kanaan. The partial reopening of the economy and markets at the end of April 2020, which coincided with the beginning of Ramadan, will probably diminish the losses for the following months. (Al-Watan 2020c).

6. Between 2011 and 2019, public subsidies as a percentage of GDP decreased from 20.2 percent to 4.9 percent. (Syrian Center for Policy Research 2020)

7. In a speech on 4 May, Bashar al-Assad expressed his intention to increase the role and market share of the Syrian Trading Establishment (STE), in order to remove trade intermediaries by purchasing goods directly from farmers and peasants at acceptable prices and selling them to consumers at lower costs. The effects of this policy are yet to be seen, as no significant decline in the prices of essential products has since occurred, especially as most monopolies of products are held by traders and businessmen connected to the regime.

Furthermore, the state continues to act as the largest employer in the country, with approximately 1.5 million public workers and 500,000 pensioners (Ashtar 2019). The significance of the state's employment in the economy and labour force has actually expanded considerably since 2011, as large segments of the private sector were ravaged by war and many workers left the country, or were killed or seriously injured. The national average of state employment rose from 26.9 percent in 2010 to over 55 percent in 2015 as a result of the downturn in total employment (Syrian Center for Policy Research 2015).

The crucial role of state institutions as the main provider of social services, essential products, and employment in the country does not, however, minimize their enduring and indeed growing shortcomings and limitations. Today, the state is unable to provide adequate services to large segments of the populace. The government's annual spending on health is less than \$20 per capita, amounting to around \$350-400 million annually.⁸ According to one study, the maximum number of COVID-19 cases that could be managed adequately in the country stands at 6,500, with large variations by governorate, ranging from 1,920 in the capital, Damascus, to none at all in Deir al-Zor (Gharibah and Mehchy 2020).

The Syrian state also lacks the financial means to compensate millions of people for the economic losses generated by the pandemic. In mid-April, the government launched a "National Campaign for Emergency Social Response," led by the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, to aid certain categories of people affected by the Coronavirus.⁹ A month later, it was announced that registrations were halted to examine the more than 400,000 persons who applied for assistance. At the end of May, fewer than 5,000 people—instead of the 20,000 initially expected—received a one-time payment of 100,000 Syrian pounds (corresponding at the time to around \$54, assuming an exchange rate of 1,860 SYP/\$).¹⁰ Another group of around 80,000 workers is due to receive a similar amount within the next five months. The total cost of this operation amounts to some 10 billion SYP (corresponding to just over \$1 million) (Al-Watan 2020d; Snack Syrian 2020b).

These amounts are insufficient to compensate for the loss in income suffered by workers between mid-March and the end of May, especially as inflation continued to rise in parallel with a fall in the value of the Syrian pound from 1,090 SYP/\$ at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March to nearly 2,900 SYP/\$ on the black market as of 7 June.¹¹

This situation undermines the regime's ability to control and (re-)impose any form of hegemony, even a passive one, on society. In its attempts to fill the void arising from state institutions' weakness

and diminishing capacities, the regime relies on multiple international and local actors; actors with various roles in the regime's efforts to control society.

2. Manipulating International Humanitarian Assistance

International humanitarian assistance provided to population groups within Syria has amounted to billions of dollars since the start of the uprising in March 2011.

Alongside this international assistance, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)—officially external to state institutions, though operating within the regime's orbit—is a key actor supplying a diverse range of services and assistance around the country, including education, healthcare, and humanitarian and rehabilitation projects. Another significant non-state actor under the regime's sway is the Syrian Trust for Development (STD), linked directly to the presidential palace through Asma al-Assad. Its activities span various fields. With over 2,500 volunteers across ten governorates, it has a particularly active presence in Damascus, Latakia, and certain parts of the Damascus countryside (Mas'oud 2020). The STD is also affiliated with multiple local NGOs with which it collaborates on various projects.

This inequality of state services across regions primarily results from these regions' statuses during the war. In general, the regions most lacking in essential state services are those formerly held by the opposition, which suffered significant damage and destruction at the hands of the regime and its allies, Russia and Iran. The punitive measures inflicted on these regions continued after the regime re-imposed its military domination and control upon them, in the form of insufficient rehabilitation of key public services and sometimes even worse essential services and infrastructure. In the formerly opposition-held areas of Daraa and Eastern Ghouta, for example, the provision of municipal services is by and large limited to food distribution, mostly conducted in cooperation with the SARC, while subsidized bread and cooking gas are provided through neighborhood committees designated by the municipality.

More broadly, almost all of the service provision and public infrastructure rehabilitation is carried out by the SARC or in coordination with it, with funding and support from UN agencies and INGOs. Alongside these entities, various international and local NGOs perform particular activities of limited scope, for the most part in close affiliation with the authorities and their institutions. For example, in the COVID-19 context, various local and governorate-level authorities partnered with NGOs, charity associations, the SARC, and sometimes ministries to develop action plans to provide food, healthcare, and medical assistance to families in need. Meanwhile, local populations' needs remain substantial, and healthcare provision is limited to basic services.

The vast majority of international humanitarian organizations authorized by Damascus have had to go through the SARC, and/or (to a lesser) extent the STD and associated NGOs, which are deemed necessary entry points. Around 60 percent of all UN aid operations in Syria are carried out through the SARC, while the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Syria has cooperated with the STD during the war. Between 2012 and 2016, UNHCR spent \$7.7 million through the STD, while the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) allocated over \$751,000 to it in 2016. Damascus, therefore, has the ability to

8. For the 2020 budget, the Syrian government allocated 266 billion SYP (amounting to \$380 million at the official Syrian Central Bank exchange rate of 700 SYP/\$, but only \$133-177 million at the black market rate) to the Ministry of Health.

9. Those able to register for applications were elderly people aged 70 and above; families caring for people with special needs (who were eligible for in-kind benefits, such as food and health baskets, chronic medicines, and towels); and daily workers and freelancers whose work was affected by the measures taken to confront the virus (mostly in the tourism and entertainment sectors, including parks and restaurants).

10. The payments were supposed to be made before the Eid al-Fitr break, but faced numerous problems, including reassessing the list of people to provide the assistance to, as many names on the list were deemed not in need of aid.

11. The value of the Syrian pound diminished to 2,500 SYP/\$ by mid-June 2020.

impose central control over aid programs and operations inside the country—in other words, to manipulate them and limit aid to specific regions. For instance, the government has restricted aid deliveries to former opposition-controlled areas (Haid 2019: 6-7) and prevented and/or restricted medical supplies from reaching non-government-held parts of the country since the COVID-19 outbreak in March (Human Rights Watch 2020). This situation has also been exacerbated by international humanitarian organizations, such as the World Health Organization, collaborating with the Syrian Ministry of Health and affiliated institutions as their primary partners in addressing the pandemic, while refraining from dealing with other actors in areas outside government control.

The role appointed to the SARC and STD by Damascus is reminiscent of previous practices prior to 2011, which the war has aggravated. These include, in particular: 1) compensating for the state's insufficiency as a provider of social services, in the context of neoliberal and austerity policies; and 2) attracting and siphoning off significant amounts of foreign funding. Though officially separate from the state, these organizations should be regarded as parts of the regime's networks, operating in pursuit of its interests.

3. Regime Networks

Alongside state institutions and the manipulation of international humanitarian assistance, the regime makes use of its own power networks to guarantee certain basic services. It does this not only to mitigate its own shortcomings, but also to consolidate its control over society. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a fresh opportunity to mobilize some of these networks. According to the political dynamics and specificities of each region, and the reach of state institutions, Damascus mobilizes various pro-regime networks, including businessmen, prominent members of local society (such as religious and tribal figures), Baath Party officials, militias, and intelligence officers to control populations at the local level.

In particular, these networks were mobilized to counter what were initially rather autonomous local initiatives in some of the main cities (e.g., Damascus, Latakia, Tartous, Sweida, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Daraa) to provide assistance to people most in need and make up for state institutions' lack of services. Exceptions to these dynamics were seen in regions where the state and regime networks are largely absent, as in certain areas of Daraa province. This allowed some forms of autonomy for local community networks to organize independently, often under the auspices of tribal sheikhs and dignitaries (Al-Jabassini 2020).

Businessmen

Businessmen, especially those close to the regime, have launched their own charity organizations and humanitarian initiatives even before 2011, such as the Al-Bustan Charity Foundation established in 1999 by Rami Makhlof.¹² Through his company Syriatel and his "Fidelity to the Martyr" association, Makhlof was particularly

active in the coastal area in funding and providing various services, including medical treatment and weddings, to militiamen, soldiers, and members of the security services. At the start of Ramadan in late April 2020, Makhlof declared he would donate 500 million SYP (corresponding to between \$384,500 and \$415,000, assuming a rate of 1,200-1,300 SYP/\$) to people in need through a youth initiative¹³ and the Al-Bustan foundation (Makhlof 2020a). At the end of Ramadan in late May, he announced a transfer of nearly 1.5 billion SYP (corresponding to approximately \$806,000 at a rate of \$1,860 SYP/\$) to the Al-Bustan foundation and other charities to assist people in need, particularly the 7,500 families of "martyrs" and 2,500 wounded to which Al-Bustan provided services (Makhlof 2020b).¹⁴

Following the outbreak of the conflict, new business figures connected to the regime have pursued similar paths. Samer Foz, for example, created the Foz charity, active in Latakia and Damascus. Abu Ali Khodr has funded local social initiatives in the governorate of Tartus (Aldassouky 2020).

Similarly, after the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives by businessmen to provide basic necessities, particularly food and medicine, to populations in need increased considerably, often with much promotion and advertising from state and pro-regime media. In Damascus, Mohammad Hamsho declared that his Hamsho Group of companies would make their financial, logistical, and human resources available to aid Syrian society and confront the pandemic, in collaboration with the governorate of Damascus (Abdel Razeq 2020). On 23 March, another group of businessmen led by Khaled Zubaidi announced an initiative to distribute 200,000 packs of bread per day for free in various parts of the Damascus countryside, for a period of fifteen days starting 31 March (Syria Industry News 2020).¹⁵ In April in the city of Latakia, the Foz Charity delivered several hundred food baskets of basic goods to communities in need, collaborating primarily with the Directorate of Social Affairs and Labor and local associations, as well as supplying hygiene products and liquids to the Health Directorate (Foz Charity 2020).

In Aleppo, the MP and Chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry, Fares Shehabi, announced in late March that the Aleppo Chamber of Industry would distribute bread for free to people in need in the city, beginning the campaign in the city's eastern neighborhoods, which suffered massive destruction during the war (Snack Syrian 2020a). The initiative also included food baskets for security officers and the provision of 1,000 waterproof uniforms to cleaning workers (The Syria Report 2020). However, Aleppo's networks of businessmen, particularly those linked to the regime, have diminished substantially as a result of the war, which has reduced charity initiatives providing social and humanitarian aid to communities in need. Other organizations have broadened their activities in order to partially fill this void.

12. The recent rift between Rami Makhlof and the rest of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle does not change the fact that Makhlof's Al-Bustan foundation and other charity initiatives still serve pro-regime networks, especially as regards the families of soldiers killed and wounded. The only difference is the identity of the person heading these networks, which has transferred from Makhlof to the presidential palace (Daher 2020).

13. A youth initiative to help families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including in food basket distribution.

14. This announcement was made a few days after the "Wounded of the Homeland" program, established in 2014 and managed by the presidency to meet the needs of injured soldiers and pro-regime militiamen. Each person wounded to a degree calculated at 70 percent or more would receive 200,000 SYP (\$100-\$133), while those between 40 and 65 percent would receive 150,000 SYP (\$75-\$100) (Jarrah al-Watan 2020). This reflected attempts by Rami Makhlof to compete with the presidential palace for popularity.

15. However, in an interview on Syrian TV on 31 March, he recognized that his initiative was facing difficulties as the government requested him to reduce the quantities of bread distributed (The Syria Report 2020).

Baathist and Other Networks

In addition to business networks, the regime has in recent years revived the role of the Baath Party as an additional instrument with which to control society and mobilize its popular base (Favier and Kostrz 2019). In the COVID-19 context, Baathist networks have been activated and deployed by the regime in various cities and regions to “strengthen the role of the Party in society,” as stated officially by its leadership (Al-Watan 2020a). Local Baath branches have initiated or participated in various campaigns in coordination with ministries, governorates, and local authorities. In Damascus, for example, a campaign called “Together We Can” was launched by the Party’s Damascus branch in early April 2020, involving the distribution of bread and basic foodstuffs to local residents, and assistance in disinfection campaigns (Al-Watan 2020b). Other entities, such as the Baath Party’s youth organization, known as the Revolutionary Youth Union, have also been mobilized by the regime.

Syria Youth Imprint (SYI) is another significant NGO active within the regime’s network, claiming more than 70 branches over all government-controlled areas (as well as in several foreign countries). Thousands of volunteers are involved in humanitarian, rehabilitation, development, and relief activities, with a particular focus on programs benefiting families of killed and wounded Syrian army soldiers (SANA 2017; Amar 2018). The NGO has also been engaged in various activities and campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis.

Certain pro-regime militias have also developed their own systems of service provisions, including the distribution of clean water, humanitarian aid, and utilities to loyalist constituencies in the areas in which they are present (Aldassouky and Hatahet 2020).

4. A Contested Social Space, But...

None of the above measures have fully sufficed to cover the needs of local populations, who continue to endure harsh living conditions. Nor have the government’s attempts to control them prevented forms of dissent and criticism from being expressed. This was especially the case in formerly opposition-held areas, such as Daraa and Eastern Ghouta, which received little or no social service provision, and faced severely repressive measures at the hands of the intelligence branches and pro-regime militias.

Communities and individuals considered supportive of the government were not spared similar treatment, however. Detentions of pro-government journalists and figures denouncing corruption or the economic situation have multiplied over the past two years, in an attempt to restrict public criticism (Al Modon 2020a). The regime has never previously taken action of this kind on so large a scale, despite pro-regime actors’ occasional criticisms of the failures, shortcomings, and corruption of the government and its officials (Daher 2017).

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, criticisms of a new kind emerged. These were directed, for example, at the way the government dealt with the “smart card” system and the distribution of bread in Damascus and its countryside,¹⁶ or the access to petroleum products

through the smart card system in Sweida in June (Al-Watan 2020e). In the city of Latakia, protesters demonstrated against the government’s decision to move the vegetable market to another location (Al-Quds Al-Arabi 2020). In late May, a gathering in front of the Sweida City Council chanted slogans including “We want to live in dignity” and “You burned us out,” denouncing the severe economic conditions and the failure of government policies to tackle them (Suwayda 24 2020a). A few weeks later, a video was published on social media showing an employee of the Minister of Education being dismissed by the Syrian government and having his salary terminated due to his participation in these protests (Suwayda 24 2020b). Starting 7 June, further demonstrations occurred in the city of Sweida protesting the socioeconomic situation and high cost of living, but this time with slogans also attacking Bashar al-Assad directly, calling on him to step down and for Iran and Russia to leave Syria. At the same time, protests also took place in Daraa and several of its surrounding towns, as well as in the town of Jaramana, southeast of Damascus, with similar slogans complaining about the socioeconomic crisis and the Syrian government’s handling thereof (Al Modon 2020b).

Significant and widespread criticism of the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor’s “National Campaign for Emergency Social Response” was also voiced on social media after an initial list of names was leaked, as many individuals on it were deemed not to require financial assistance. Similarly, as already mentioned, certain local initiatives that emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were able to sustain themselves autonomously due to the absence of the state and the regime’s networks.

However, these forms of dissent and criticism do not necessarily translate into political opportunities, particularly after more than nine years of a destructive and murderous war. They also remain highly rooted in particular local regions, with no connections whatsoever between them. The absence of a structured, independent, democratic, and inclusive Syrian political opposition which could appeal to the popular classes makes it difficult for diverse sectors of the population to unite and challenge the regime anew on a national scale.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the dependence of large segments of the Syrian population on the state’s institutions. The continuous repression of any political and social alternative to the regime, in tandem with the devastation of much of the economy, have reinforced state institutions as the leading and essential provider of services, as well as the main employer in the country. However, the regime’s capacities in this regard have diminished since the eruption of the uprising in March 2011.

In order to (re-)impose a form of passive hegemony on wide sectors of the population under its control, the regime has used various tools and networks. Entities such as the SARC and STD have strengthened the regime by trying to secure international humanitarian funds and manipulating humanitarian assistance. In addition, charitable foundations and initiatives linked to businessmen, and the mobilization of Baathist networks, seek likewise to consolidate the authoritarian stability of the regime, while strengthening its power and clientelist networks. All of these actors are means of managing and dominating society. This is why Damascus considered the emergence of autonomous and local solidarity initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to be a challenge to its authority, even a menace.

16. The Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection actually stipulated in mid-April that the private company responsible for managing the smart card system, Takamol, would no longer be in charge of it. This was significant, as Takamol Holdings is partially owned by Asma al-Assad’s cousin, Muhannad al-Dabbagh.

However, as this article has demonstrated, the imposition of passive hegemony on much of society has not been successfully achieved. Forms of open dissent still exist, and criticisms of government policies are voiced on a large scale even within areas under its control. Moreover, the latest demonstrations in Sweida and Daraa governorates are public displays of opposition to the central authorities. While the resilience of the Syrian regime has long been ensured; first and foremost by the support of its foreign allies, Russia and Iran; Damascus nonetheless has repeatedly had to confront a wide spectrum of political and socioeconomic challenges and contradictions. The result is an unstable situation for the regime, as it generally lacks the tools to face these and create the conditions needed to stabilize its power.

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