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An analysis of Assad's policies: further and further from an Early Economic Recovery

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, the Syrian Armed Forces regained control of the territories in the south and west of the country. This was a turning point in the Syrian civil war.¹ Assad's regime had cornered the opposition groups in the north and had retaken the birthplace of the revolution. By doing so, he cemented a relative peace and connected the south of the country, Aleppo and the coastal governorates. The conflict is still on going, however, Bashar al-Assad is already implementing different economic policies geared towards reconstruction and developmental: reopening of electric power plants, oil refineries, seed-distribution schemes for agriculturalists and real estate mega projects such as Marota City or Basilia City. At the same time, Assad is dealing with an economic downturn, contestation of his monopoly of power, and limited state capacity. In this situation of resource scarcity, it is important to study

¹ Al Jazeera, "Syrian government raises flag in Deraa, birthplace of revolt," *Al Jazeera*, July 12, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/syrian-government-raises-flag-deraa-birthplace-revolt-180712180058690.html>

the options that the government is taking. Media and Academia are focusing mainly on military developments and political negotiations to achieve a peaceful solution. However, they are neglecting economic issues, which were in the first place, one of the triggers of the Arab uprisings². Not only that, the body of literature that this paper will study establishes the importance of the economy in building peace after conflict. This paper will, first, develop a framework from this post-conflict literature and the United Nations (UN) concept of Early Recovery to define the policy recommendations that a government should follow after conflict. Second, by using actual reports and news from the last year, it will be shown that Assad is not following the steps for an Early Economic Recovery. In fact, Assad's economic policies are being used politically to punish ex-rebel areas and to reward loyalists' areas and to enrich loyal economic elites.³ Furthermore, he is neglecting any diversification of the economy and fomenting an unequal development between regions and fostering investment in non-productive sectors of the economy, such as finance or real estate. Third, this paper studies the reasons why Assad is carrying out these policies. To do that, it analyzes the national and international context. By doing so, we explore how these realities are opening certain possibilities for the government. Then, the paper examines the structure of the regime, understood as a network of clientelist relations. This ultimately determines the economic choices that Assad is taking. The regime is navigating between a situation of resource scarcity, due to the conflict and the economic sanctions and the new alliances generated by a multipolar world. As I will argue, the securitization of the conflict is creating the perfect excuse for the government to carry out social cuts while investing in the military. Finally, the structure of the regime has remained largely unchanged, therefore, the economic policies are, up to certain extent, a continuation of the neoliberal and liberalization processes prior to the conflict. jointed with investments in the service sector, especially in Finance and real estate. However, the rise of new trading economic elites is preventing the regime from supporting further import-substitution programs or protectionist measures. This paper, therefore, draws from the literature review to build a theoretical framework with which analyze Assad's policies. These policies and the context surrounding them comes from the

² Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of revolt: Issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

³ Maen Tallaa et al. *Economic Recovery in Syria: Mapping Actors and Assessing Current Policies*, (Istanbul: Omran for Strategic Studies, 2019), 21.

monitoring of international and Syrian news coupled with certain recent policies reports. These reports have been revisited and their thesis checked with the latest government's measures. Lastly, this paper did not build a comprehensive theoretical framework with which study Assad's reasons. However, it draws theories and methods from different fields - historical analysis, multipolarity, interests groups- to study a question whose answer has many different layers. That is why a multidisciplinary approach was chosen this time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of post-conflict reconstruction is a relatively new body of literature. The end of the Cold War gave way to the decade of humanitarian intervention. International actors intervened in post-conflict situations almost without previous analysis.⁴ It was a decade of improvisation. The UN adopted the Liberal Peace Thesis of Woodrow Wilson and his fourteen points. The result was market liberalization and democratization processes imposed on post-conflict societies. They followed the idea that democracies do not fight each other, especially if there are economic ties and trade between them.⁵ These peacebuilding strategies were criticized in the later decade.

The post-conflict academia that developed in the 2000s drew experiences and knowledge from those UN peacebuilding interventions that happened between 1989 and 1998. Mainly in African civil wars such as Namibia, Angola, Mozambique or Rwanda. Authors like Roland Paris or Paul Collier grew skeptical with those liberal policies. Paris acknowledges certain UN successes in Namibia or Croatia. However, in most of the cases, economic liberalization shocks and democratization processes aggravated social tensions.⁶ In the later years, both UN peacebuilding pillars were criticized by this trend: first, economic liberalization. Second, political democratization projects. Collier brought up the importance of the economy and economic policies in escaping conflict in his book 'Breaking the Conflict Trap'. For him, the international community should stop prioritizing free-market democracies as peacebuilding projects. In fact, it was necessary the opposite: "cushioning adverse shocks".

⁴ Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom, "Post-Conflict Risks," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 461-478, 462.

⁵ Roland Paris, *At War's end: Building Peace After Civil Conflict*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ Paris, *At War's end*.

That it is, reducing the volatile effect of the global economy in the national's economy.⁷ In a second critical wave, Thomas Flores and Irfan Nooruddin gave even greater importance to economic policies and recovery for a long-term peace. Their findings postulated that democratization processes retard economic recovery and, therefore, increases the chance of returning to armed conflict.⁸ Apart from criticizing the UN stand, the body of post-conflict literature agreed on certain guidelines and economic policies to implement in post-conflict situations.

There are certain aspects which most of the academia recognize: the main statement is that standard developmental policies are inapplicable in post-conflict situations⁹ and sometimes they are even counterproductive.¹⁰ After this initial point, scholars tend to disagree in the implementation or prioritization of certain policies over others. Questions of when, how and how much. However, there is a consensus in the following points: importance of social policies over macroeconomic policies, cutting military spending, diversification and rebuilding of formal taxable economy. It is importance to mention that many of them have analyzed and produced theories about developmental aid in post-conflict situations. Nevertheless, since this paper is focusing on economic policies carried about by national actors, these have not been included.

First, cutting military spending should be the top priority of the post-conflict government. Military expenditure has a negative impact on growth since resources funding the military are resources that are not funding productive sectors of the economy and, therefore, reducing productive capital formation.¹¹ Simply put, money spent on the military is money not spent elsewhere. As some of the scholars acknowledge, there might be a deterrence argument for military spending in post-conflict situations. As the country's monopolization of power is contested, stronger military will deter opposition groups from taking the weapons again.

⁷ Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil War and development policy*, World Bank Policy research report, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press/World Bank, 2003).

⁸ Thomas Edward Flores and Irfan Nooruddin, "Democracy under the Gun Understanding Postconflict Economic Recovery", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 no. 1 (2009): 3-29.

⁹ Paul Collier, "Post-conflict Recovery: How Should Strategies Be Distinctive?" *Journal of African Economies* 18 no. 1 (2009): 99-131.

¹⁰ Neclâ Tschirgi, "Post-conflict peacebuilding revisited: achievements, limitations, challenges," WSP International/IPA Peacebuilding Forum Conference (New York, 2004).

¹¹ Ragnar Gudmundsson, "Economics of Postconflict Countries: A Survey of the Literature" in *Post-conflict Economics in Sub-Saharan Africa, Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, edited by Jean Clement (Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2004), 62-86.

However, as Collier explains, this deterrence effect is false. Maintaining high military spending increases the risk of going back to war or of falling into an arms race scenario. It does not generate trust or confidence between government and opposition.¹² In this sense, trust is of vital importance for peace. As Collier explains, “confidence in peace is self-fulfilling.” Trust positively impacts investment, both international and national, which has a direct impact on economic growth.¹³ This growth might improve people’s livelihoods and reduce poverty. The literature, even beyond Post-conflict studies, establishes strong links between poverty and civil war.^{14,15} More poverty results in greater chances of conflict due to scarce resources and for improving one’s living conditions. Another argument for increasing military spending is the destabilizing effect of demobilized soldiers. Groups of ex-soldiers have good reasons to resort to conflict again: they have the networks and skills to fight and have been deprived of their living. However, studies on the impact of ex-combatants on crime rates shows a very different picture: ex-soldiers tend to return to non-violent lifestyles if they have the chance. In the studies, they showed that crime rates increased in areas of certain African cities only when a number of ex-soldiers returned home and did not have access to land.¹⁶

The second most recurrent point is emphasizing social policies over macroeconomic policies. Neclâ Tschirgi argues that the traditional macroeconomic advice of stabilization and disinflation does not work in post-conflict societies. It is necessary to tackle income distribution and poverty.¹⁷ Not only as a way of reducing the social tensions and deprivation that caused the conflict in the first place, but also as a rhetoric tool. For Collier, investing in long-term assets such as education and healthcare send a political message of inclusion. If these policies target citizen groups equally it has a positive effect on political confidence and, therefore, economic trust. Tony Addison draws attention to this matter. Public investment has to be allocated more equally among regions or ethnic groups.¹⁸ Specifically, the

¹² Collier, *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, 152.

¹³ Paul Collier, “Economic Policy in Post-Conflict Societies” in *Post-Conflict Economies in Africa*, edited by Augustin Kwasi Fosu and Paul Collier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 45-56, 49.

¹⁴ Jonathan Goodhand, “Enduring Disorder and Persistent Poverty: A Review of the Linkages Between War and Chronic Poverty,” *World Development* 31 no. 3 (March 2003): 629-646.

¹⁵ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “On economic causes of civil war,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 50 no. 4 (October 1998): 563-573.

¹⁶ Collier, “Economic Policy”.

¹⁷ Neclâ, “Post-conflict peacebuilding revisited”, 13.

¹⁸ Tony Addison, “Africa’s Recovery from Conflict: Making Peace Work for the Poor,” *Policy Brief* No. 6 (Helsinki: World Institute for Development Economics, 2002).

government should focus on job creation for the youth and ex-combatants.¹⁹ This step towards reconciliation will be welcomed by possible investors. They will see less likely an armed conflict in a country that is investing to increase its human capital or it might even encourage repatriation of funds.²⁰

The third action point is development. It seems clear that a country whose economy and infrastructure have been damaged needs a plan and economic goals to move forward and leave the conflict behind. Although the consensus on this matter is not total, there are certain common points. Evoking African experiences, 'Breaking the Conflict Trap' suggests a diversification process.²¹ The authors encourage governments to move away from primary commodities for two reasons. First, global markets for primary commodities are very volatile. An economy depending on primary goods is quite subject to price shocks that might generate instability in the country. Second, the extraction of primary goods might increase the risk of corruption and nepotism. Plus, an economy solely dependent on natural resources increases the incentive of conflict for the control of those resources.²² Lastly, from a more liberal perspective, diversification tends to improve the national terms of trade and the leverage on international markets.²³

The fourth consensus is a more heterogeneous group of policies related to rebuilding the formal economy and transparency. Usually, post-conflict states find themselves in a dilemma. In conflict, the informal economy expands at the expense of the formal, taxable economy. At the same time, in post-conflict situations, there are greater need for reconstruction and social policies, which requires public investment. Governments have to decide whether to lower their expenditure, which increases the chances of conflict since they will not be able to carry out any social measure. Or, on the contrary, they impose high taxes on the small sectors that are part of the formal economy.²⁴ The literature recommends to restore as soon as possible tax base and administrative capacity. More specifically, in unstable situations, indirect taxes, like border taxes, are recommended.²⁵ In more general terms, and

¹⁹ Collier, "Post-Conflict Recovery".

²⁰ Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, 152.

²¹ Ibid, 134.

²² Ibid, 126.

²³ Antonio C. David et al. "Post-conflict Recovery: Institutions, Aid, or Luck?" *IMF Working Paper* (June 2011), 23

²⁴ Collier, "Economic Policy in Post-conflict Societies".

²⁵ Gudmundsson, "Economics of Postconflict Countries".

related to the formal economy, academia suggests that governments should their transparency in matters of revenues and expenditures.²⁶ Restoring the rule of law and property rights is important for building up economic and political trust. Collier specially mention the necessity to settle property disputes that might arise from IPDs returning to their homes.²⁷

Lastly, another point emphasizes the role of the financial sector in post-conflict recovery. As we have seen above, most of the authors prioritize social policies over any other economic reform. However, Addison Murshed and Philippe Le Billon argued that the financial sector contributes to the macroeconomic stability, increases government revenue and facilitates private investment. However, the same authors warn of certain concerns. Development of the financial sector might facilitate the funding of rebel operations and reignite the conflict. Furthermore, focusing on finances as the engine of growth might lead to a narrow development, understood as a situation in which the banking sector is used to finance private accumulation but does not lead to reduction of poverty or inequality.²⁸

Early Economic Recovery: Theoretical framework

As the post-conflict literature was advancing its critique on the UN-led interventions of 1990s, the United Nations began to reform the international humanitarian system. In 2005, the UNDP was assigned with the task of including economic development into humanitarian thinking.²⁹ The result of this was the concept of Early Recovery. This idea was influenced by the post-conflict literature in as much as it acknowledges the importance of economic recovery in post-conflict situations as part of a peacebuilding project.

The framework of this paper will blend notions of UN's Early Recovery with policy advice from the cited post-conflict literature of the 2000s. I will not use later literature for two reasons. First, the works of the generation led by Paris and Collier influenced the UN and are still used as a normative framework for humanitarian aid in post-conflict situation. Second, these works themselves are still influencing the later generation of post-conflict scholars. Therefore, their ideas are recognized both in academia and in practice. Moreover, I decided

²⁶ Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, 130.

²⁷ Ibid, 152.

²⁸ Tony Addison, Philippe Le Billon, S. Mansoob Murshed, "Finance in conflict and reconstruction," *Journal of International Development* 13 no. 1 (October 2001): 951-964

²⁹ Tallaa et al. *Economic Recovery in Syria*, 27.

not to solely use UN's Early Economic Recovery for two reasons. First, the UN's term is mainly a humanitarian guideline. It is not perfectly fit to use it as a normative framework for economic policy advice. Second, the term has been greatly influenced by the above-mentioned authors. Therefore, including their works in the theoretical framework makes it more complete.

Early Recovery is used by the UNDP as a "multidimensional process of recovery" in a transitional period.³⁰ It is the transition from immediate humanitarian relief right after the conflict to a more developmental approach in the medium and long term.³¹ UNDP papers tend to describe the framework in vague terms. It uses broad concepts and general goals. Some of the most important are the following: Improve access to justice and enhance dispute-resolution mechanisms; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)³²; restoration of basic infrastructure, encouraging the return of Internally displaced people (IDP) and their reintegration,³³ or emergency temporary jobs plans.³⁴ Early Economic Recovery is also related to "the promotion of equality, non-discrimination, and accountability", as well as respect national and private ownership.³⁵ This notion of Early Recovery or Early Economic Recovery resemble the main points of the 2000s post-conflict literature. I will reiterate five main points that will serve as a guideline for analyzing Assad's economic policies: Military spending and demilitarization; prioritize social policies related to wealth distribution, education, healthcare and job creation; production diversification; rebuilding formal economy and enhancing government transparency; restoring finance sector considering the danger of narrow development. The next paragraphs will analyze Assad's regime's measures and policies in relation with these points.

POLICY ANALYSIS

After establishing the theoretical starting point and framework, I will proceed to compare Assad's regime's policies with what international organizations and the literature

³⁰ UNDP, "UNDP Policy on Early Recovery", *United Nations Development Programme* (2008), 7.

³¹ Hugo de Vries and Leontine Specker, "Early Economic Recovery in Fragile States: Priority Areas and Operational Challenges," *Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations* (The Hague: Clingendael), 8.

³² UNDP, "on Early Recovery", 17.

³³ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

³⁵ Talla, *Economic Recovery in Syria*, 29.

recommends to do in post-conflict situations. As mentioned above, the conflict has not finished yet. However, it is localized in areas of the north of the country, whereas important economic regions such as Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra, Tartous or Latakia are experiencing relative peace. As the literature on Early Recovery mentions, this process starts even before the conflict ends and, in the Syrian case, Bashar al-Assad's regime has already started to take developing and reconstruction measures. For these policies' analysis I will use working papers, think tank reports and media articles. Most of these sources will be reports or news published in 2019. Since these are very recent, there is not much analysis in academia. I will depend on a series of reports produced by think tanks. However, their authors are experts on the field and their claims will be double-checked through media articles.

Demilitarization

The Assad's regime is not opting for demilitarization and demobilization. There is no clear data on how much the Syrian government is spending in defense. According to the American website 'Global Fire Power', the budget of the Syrian army is 1.8 billion dollars, which represents 5% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP).³⁶ However, these numbers do not tell the whole picture. Especially because most of the Assad's military spending comes in form of external support (from Iran, Russia or Hezbollah), or informal or illicit means (checkpoints, drugs trade, smuggling, etc.).³⁷ Moreover, the increasing role of informal or foreign militias in the economy makes the formal Syrian army budget less relevant.³⁸ Despite this, it seems that the Syrian regime is far from demilitarizing the country either directly or through allowing militias to control aspects of the economy in rural and urban areas. First, the defense and military budgets are still prioritized over other sectors.³⁹ Second, Assad's regime is intensifying compulsory military conscription for men⁴⁰. This measure has further implications in the economy and in return of IPDs (of which we will talk later). But it also has a negative

³⁶ "Syria Military Strength (2020)," Country Military Strength, Global Fire Power, accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=syria

³⁷ Salam Said, Email message to author, February 27, 2020.

³⁸ Munqeth Othman Agha, "Early Recovery in Syria: An Assessment of the Regime's Role and Capability," in *Economic Recovery in Syria: Mapping Actors and Assessing Current Policies* ed. Mohamed Al Bdullah (Istanbul: Omran for Strategic Studies, 2019): 84-129, 127.

³⁹ Salam Said, "Early Economic Recovery in Syria: Challenges and Priorities" in *Economic Recovery in Syria: Mapping Actors and Assessing Current Policies* ed. Mohamed Al Bdullah (Istanbul: Omran for Strategic Studies, 2019): 26-59, 47.

⁴⁰ Agha, "An Assessment of the Regime's Role and Capability", 85.

effect in building confidence between both sides and it is transversally opposite to the demobilization principle that the Early Recovery literature recommends.

Social Policies

While the Syrian government has devoted much of its budget to the defense sector, it has nevertheless began diverting efforts towards real estate and macroeconomic policies. Furthermore, the Syrian government is diverting efforts into real estate and macroeconomic policies while using limited social interventions as a rhetoric tool. During the conflict, the Syrian government brought about a downwards trend in social subsidies and wages. Before the war, the budget for subsidies was 6.7 billion dollars, which represents 36% of the total budget, while it decreased to 1.8 billion in 2019 – 21 percent of the budget.⁴¹ Therefore, Syrians have seen social subsidies reduced in absolute terms (possibly due to the destruction of the 75% of the economy during the conflict⁴²) and also in relative terms. Wages and subsidies have been decreasing likewise.⁴³ At the same time, the Syrian government has tried to navigate possible criticism for these unpopular measures. On one hand, they have made real improvements in water systems and electricity grids by reconstructing dams and power plants^{44,45} On the other hand, they have used these minor improvements as a veil hide social cuts. A clear example of this tactic is the food basket campaign. It was promoted as a food subsidy but the prices of the basket exceeded in some cities the individual products' prices in the local markets.⁴⁶ The latest example of this neglect of social policies is the current gas crisis. Whereas Syrian cities suffer a shortage of heating and cooking gas, there are still resources to carry out military operations in the north-west.⁴⁷

Formal Economy

⁴¹ Ibid,

⁴² Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, "Syria's Conflict Economy," *IMF Working Papers*, 10.

⁴³ Hussam Saleh, "Syria's budget 2019 ... No increase in salaries, cuts to support and reconstruction need half

⁴⁴ Al-masdar, "Syria revives important dam in Al-Raqqa", *Al-masdar News*, December 4, 2019.

<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syria-revives-important-dam-in-al-raqqa/>

⁴⁵ Enab Baladi, "New power station in Hama ... rationing exceeds seven hours," (in Arabic) *Enab Baladi*, November 25, 2019. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/344563>

⁴⁶ Abdul Hadi, "25 thousand citizens bought the «Syrian Trade» basket" (in Arabic) *Al Watan*, December 1, 2019. <http://alwatan.sy/archives/224162>

⁴⁷ LBC, "The gas crisis comes at a time that is considered most dangerous ...," (in Arabic) *LBC*, January 16, 2020.

Another policy advice from the literature is to reestablish the formal economy, rule of law and encourage return of IDPs and refugees. The Syrian government's best attempt to reestablish a formal economy has been the anti-smuggling campaigns.⁴⁸ However, as it happened with social policies, the crackdown on smuggling routes has been carried out inconsistently and used as a political tool. For example, the Syrian government froze the assets of Rami Makhoulf (wealthiest man in Syria), a series of businessmen, and their relatives due to smuggling charges.⁴⁹ However, it seems to be more of a political decision since different media outlets have revealed that numerous customs officers and other businessmen are participating in smuggling activities. In contract with Makhoulf, they were able to bend these anti-smuggling rules and halted any legal actions against them.⁵⁰ Another way of reestablishing a formal economy is through taxes. The Syrian regime has increased the tax revenue by improving the collecting mechanisms in the last years. Also, in 2018, the government -imposed transit fees on trucks coming from Jordan,⁵¹ which was one of the policy advices to restore tax revenue base.

Rule of law and returnees

While the Syrian government is taking some steps -although inconsistent- towards reactivating the formal economy, the Assad's regime is completely neglecting the restoration of the rule of law and the return of IDPs or refugees. These two are intimately interviewed. Those who fled their homes would be more willing to return if they knew their rights and safety will be assured.⁵² This is not the case in Syria. Although the numbers are increasing (from 55,000 returnees in 2018 to 96,000 in 2019⁵³), this is mainly due to the end of the conflict in certain areas and the harsher treatment that the refugees are receiving in their

⁴⁸ Abdul Hadi, "Customs officer for "Al-Watan": campaign against smuggling whales in Aleppo," (in Arabic) *Al-Watan*, December 30, 2019. <http://alwatan.sy/archives/226246>

⁴⁹ Syria TV, "The system reserves the movable and immovable properties of Rami Makhoulf," (in Arabic) *Syria TV*, December 23, 2019.

⁵⁰ Joseph Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector: the model of economic recovery in question," *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, Research Project Report*, 16.

⁵¹ The Jordan Times, "Jordan, Syria private sector representatives call on gov'ts to address trade challenges," *The Jordan Times*, December 24, 2019. <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-syria-private-sector-representatives-call-govts-address-trade-challenges>

⁵² Serdar Kaya and Phil Orchard, "Prospects of Return: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Germany," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 18 no. 1 (2020): 95-112.

⁵³ UNCHR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," Overview, UNCHR, accessed February 29, 2019, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions

host countries, specially Jordan and Lebanon.⁵⁴ However, these are unrelated to the government's policies. We only need to have a look at those who have the choice to return or not. For example, the rich industrialists. These businessmen left the country when the conflict erupted. Most of them settled their business abroad, usually Turkey and Egypt. It seems that not many of them will return, even if the Syrian government is offering them tax exemptions and other incentives.⁵⁵ The causes are numerous. Returnees do not have their rights guaranteed. The European Institute of Peace reported last July how returnees are usually subject to arrests and detentions, military conscription or forced to "interact directly with the security sector completing forms that force them to volunteer information that might incriminate them or their loved ones."⁵⁶ At the same time, the Syrian Government is not implementing any measure to deal with property dispute regarding returnee's possessions. In fact, Assad's regime has created legal mechanisms to expropriate refugees' assets. The Anti-terrorism Act (Law 19) in 2012 and the Decree 63 provided the legal framework to freeze and seize any property of people *accused* of terrorism. Terrorism define very broadly as "any act [...] disturbing public order."⁵⁷ Moreover, both IDPs and refugees fled their homes without their civil or property documents. To make things worse, most of the land and civil registries had been targeted and destroyed during the war as well. Making any property claim almost impossible.⁵⁸ If the rule of law seems uncertain for those who left their homes. Things are not exceptionally better for those who stayed. This is due to the increasing power of militias, death squads or bands of thugs where the government cannot or does not want to mediate. For example, in the agricultural sector, loyalist militias control every aspect of the daily life. Subsidies, checkpoints or even security issues go through them. It creates "a bottleneck of personal relations, favoritism and straightforward bribery"⁵⁹. Furthermore, these armed groups obtained wealth and influenced during the conflict carrying out illegal activities as smuggling, looting, kidnapping or human trafficking. Most of them are still

⁵⁴ Nils Hägerdal, "Lebanon's Hostility to Syrian Refugees," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies* 116 (March, 2018)

⁵⁵ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector," 14.

⁵⁶ European Institute of Peace, "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity," *European Institute of Peace* (July 2019).

⁵⁷ Emily Stubblefield and Sandra Joireman, "Law, Violence, and Property Expropriation in Syria: Impediments to Restitution and Return," *Land* 8 no. 11 (November 2019).

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵⁹ Nazier Madi, "Cultivating a Crisis: The Political Decline of Agriculture in Syria," *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, Research Project Report*, 15.

engaging in those kinds of activities.⁶⁰ Another example of lacking rule of law is the so-called Death Squads or Shabiha. These groups have terrorized areas of different cities around the country.⁶¹ These have created feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in citizens and investors and have shown little will or capacity to exercise the rule of law.

Towards a narrow development

The post-conflict literature recommends diversification projects for a more stable and holistic Early Economic Recovery. The Syrian government is leading the economy into a narrow, inequal development. Its policies and investments are targeting only certain regions, or sectors. In general terms, Assad's regime is favoring fast-cash investments over long-term projects. Productive sectors of the economy, as agriculture or industry, have been neglected. In the case of the agricultural sector, this neglect started with Hafez al-Assad and has continued with his son, Bashar. Although the regime is engaging in developing measures such as the distribution of seeds⁶² or state-led land reclamation schemes⁶³, it has done very little to tackle the problems or challenges of small to medium agriculturalists. These problems range from unstable supply and demand, safety and security issues, and a lack of resources such as energy or water, to a shortage of workforce due to the impediments for the return of IDPs and refugees.⁶⁴ Similarly, the regime has tried to implement certain measures to support industrial development: exemptions of construction fees, supporting exports, special loans, etc. However, these measures targeted big manufacturers and, according to Josph Daher, they do not tackle the sector's structural problems.⁶⁵ More importantly, the regime is mainly engaging in the non-productive sectors of the economy, such as real estate, tourism or finance. Real estate has been a rent-generating sector for the association between regime and politically-connected economic elites prior to the war. The clearest examples are the projects of Marota City and Basilia City. Marota City is Syria's largest investment project right

⁶⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁶¹ Enab Baladi, "Residents of Aleppo fear "Shabiha" Militia are Targeting their Homes and Properties," *Enab Baladi*, January 24, 2020. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/01/residents-of-aleppo-fear-shabihamilitia-are-targeting-their-homes-and-properties/>

⁶² SANA, "Distributing 1,000 grant of wheat and barley seeds to Quneitra farmers" (in Arabic), *SANA*, October 26, 2019. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1042511>

⁶³ Al-Watan, "The government approves the national strategy for developing wheat crop and self-sufficiency within 5 year' (in Arabic), *Al-Watan*, November 12, 2019. <http://alwatan.sy/archives/220123>

⁶⁴ Madi, "Cultivating a Crisis".

⁶⁵ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector".

now. It consists of luxury residential buildings, offices and shopping centers in areas in the north-east of Damascus. Before the conflict, these areas were working-class neighborhoods, informal settlements or slums. During the conflict, they became rebel strongholds. Now, the owners of these lands have either fled their homes or they are being evicted. There are mechanisms to claim compensation, however, the inherent lack of official records has been aggravated by the conflict and it is virtually impossible these people will be able to prove ownership of the lands.⁶⁶ A similar story unfolds in Latakia, where 150 displaced families saw their houses demolished for the construction of a hotel resort.⁶⁷

As the literature mentions, the financial sector is important to achieve an Early Economic Recovery. However, focusing too much on it might lead to a narrow development. This situation is unfolding in Syria as the regime is trying to develop the financial sector while neglecting other productive sectors of the economy. In 2018, Finance received the biggest budget spending, increasing the allocated amount from 250 million SYP in 2018 to almost 850 million in 2019.⁶⁸ These policies can be seen as a way to achieve an Early Economy Recovery. However, Munqeth Agha sees it as investments with fast-return in non-productive sectors that might not support long-term development.⁶⁹ Lastly, it is important to mention that the Syrian government is fomenting unequal development: investing in loyalist areas and neglecting areas that were rebel strongholds.⁷⁰ This might be justified through an economic perspective: those rebel-controlled areas have been further destroyed than those who remained loyal to the regime. Therefore, cleaning and reconstruction efforts would need more investment with uncertain returns. Along the same vein, reconstructing and developing less-destroyed areas requires smaller investments with similar or higher returns. However, as we have seen in the case of Marota City or Latakia, the regime is willing to completely clean and erase former rebel areas. Furthermore, the economic perspective does not explain why former rebel regions are being actively excluded from the economy, isolated from markets and securitized. One example of this is Duma. This city in Eastern Ghouta was once the epicenter of food and manufacturing production of the region. All trade routes went through

⁶⁶ Aron Lund, "Dispossession or development? The tug of war over Syria's ruined slum dwellings," *The New Humanitarian*, July 4, 2018.

⁶⁷ Zaman al-wsl, "Latakia .. Al-Assad besieges the Southern Raml neighborhood and demolish dozens of homes," (in Arabic) *Zaman al-wsl*, December 17, 2019.

⁶⁸ Agha, "An Assessment of the Regime's Role and Capability", 94.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 125.

it. However, after the regime regained control of the area, Duma and the surrounding towns have been isolated from each other and connected directly with Damascus. It increases their dependency on the capital. The level of securitization and economic constraints are such that this city experienced waves of post-fighting civilian departures.⁷¹

After this analysis, I argue that Assad's policies are not in line with the policy advice of the Early Recovery literature. Although in certain sectors they coincide – development of the financial sector or the reconstruction of the formal economy, for example –, the recovery of the economy and development of the country as a whole is not Assad's main concern. Bashar al-Assad is using economic policies as a political tool to expand their regime's patronage network, and to punish former rebel areas.⁷² In the next section, we will study the regime's behind these choice. I will divide them according to whether they are exogenous or endogenous realities of the regime. I will not study notions of state capacity but rather I will define the Assad's regime as a neopatrimonial regime acting in a context that shapes its decisions.

REASONS

Closer context

To find out the reasons behind Assad's choices, I will analyze first the context that the regime is navigating. I will divide it into two spheres: the closer context or national reality, and the broader context or international reality. Then, I will analyze how the regime and its allies have been changing during the conflict. These interests groups will have an ultimate impact in the choices taken. It is clear that the on-going conflict in the north is shaping the regime's policies. Whether it is a real threat or not, the regime is using nationalist and securitization discourses to justify its policies. Securitization theory was developed in the 1990s by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver.⁷³ It explains how an actor constructs a security issue by framing it as an existential threat to the population or the nation.⁷⁴ In this case, the Syrian regime is doing so in both about the North-West and Rojava territories. By describing the Autonomous Administration

⁷¹ Ibid, 121.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Fred Vultee, "Securitization: A new approach to the framing of the 'war on terror'," *Journalism Practice* 4, no. 1 (2010): 33-47.

⁷⁴ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

of North and East Syria or the local councils of the North-West as terrorists and invasions^{75,76} it creates a sense of threat for Syria as a nation and all Syrians. Due to this nationalist rhetoric, the Assad regime will not shift away from securitization policies until it restores the nation's territorial integrity or eradicates the threat. This securitization discourse is creating the popular acceptance or compliance for the Syrian regime to follow certain policies. Going back to what the concept of Early Economic recovery advices, the conflict is used as an excuse - either real or constructed- to divert resources towards the military while preempting social discontent due to social cuts. At the same time, the constructed existential threat makes Syrians either active supporters or passive conformists of securitization measures such as numerous checkpoints or the presence of militias. However, this only describe how the Syrian regime is creating the room to follow these policies, but it does not explain why they are actively following them. This will be answered later when analyzing the endogenous nature of the regime.

International context

While the conflict in the north is being used by the regime to advance their securitization policies and diverting resources away from social and economic development, there is another reality that is shaping the options of the Syrian regime. This reason will deal with notions of economic sanctions and multipolar world. The concept of Multipolarity gained certain relevancy in the late 1990s and has been gaining more acceptance during the following decades, especially due to the rise of China.⁷⁷ This concept describes a world in which American hegemony is fading away and it is leaving room for emerging superpowers and regional powers. Examples are not only China. But Brazil, Russia, India or South Africa are usually included in this economic and political contestation to US hegemony.⁷⁸ By any means, we should include Iran in this group. The Islamic Republic of Islam was born out of the 1978 revolution. The social movement that toppled the US clientelist state of Reza Shah was anti-

⁷⁵ SANA, "Terrorists in Idleb continue their attacks, Syrian Army has full right to respond," SANA, February 29, 2019, <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=186969>.

⁷⁶ SANA, "President al-Assad to al-Fayyad: Erdogan's regime aggression on our country is blatant invasion to which Syria will respond," SANA, October 17, 2019, <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=176139>.

⁷⁷ Susan Turner, "Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009): 159-184.

⁷⁸ Kwang Ho Chun, *The BRICs Superpower Challenge: Foreign and Security Policy Analysis*, (London and New York: Routledge).

US in nature. In recent years, the rivalry between Arabia Saudi, which is an US ally, and Iran has increased in what some have called a Middle-eastern 'Cold War'.⁷⁹ Saudi Arabi and Iran have been trying to influence political outcomes everywhere they could: Lebanese politics, the Yemeni civil war and, of course, the Syrian conflict via proxies and militias. Whether Iran is an emerging global power or not is irrelevant. But it is definitely an actor that challenges US hegemony,⁸⁰ making a stronger case for a multipolar definition of the world. In this multipolar order, the Syrian regime has found not only military allies, but also economic. Its policies have been a byproduct of navigating the US-led economic sanctions and isolation within a multipolar world.

The sanctions applied to Syria since 2015 target individuals and companies linked to the Syrian government. They consist in travel bans, trade restrictions and international asset freezes, as well as ban on US citizens to invest in Syria.⁸¹ In the last decades, Economic sanctions have not been very successful in achieving their main objectives.⁸² Although economic sanctions most probably have damaged the Syrian economy and limited the state's capacity, the regime has had room to maneuver. As Nikolay Kozhanov explained for the Iranian case, ⁸³ The Syrian regime saw an increasing economic influence of what some researchers call "black knights". These are companies or states that, with the withdrawal of European companies from the Syrian market, saw their economic relevance increased. Usually these are also under economic sanctions or isolation. Before the war, the European Union (EU) was Syria's fourth largest trading partner after Iraq, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.⁸⁴ In 2017, the biggest Syrian trading partner was China.⁸⁵ As well, the relevance of Iran and Russia in the Syrian economy is also increasing. For example, the Syrian Government imports wheat⁸⁶ solely from Russia, whereas Syrian citrus and olive oil started to be

⁷⁹ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'," *Chatham House* (February 2015).

⁸⁰ Ahrari, M. Ehsan, "Iran, China, and Russia: The Emerging Anti-U.S. Nexus?," *Security Dialogue* 32 no. 4 (2001): 453-466.

⁸¹ Comply Advantage, "Sanctioned Countries: Syria," *Comply Advantage*, accessed March 1, 2020.

⁸² Anastasia B. Likhacheva, "Unilateral Sanctions in a Multipolar World," *Russia in Global Affairs* 17 no.3 (Summer 2019): 109-131.

⁸³ Nikolay A. Kozhanov, "U.S. Economic Sanctions Against Iran: Undermined by External Factors," *Middle East Policy* 18 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 144-160.

⁸⁴ European Commission, "Syria," Countries and regions, European Commission, accessed March 1, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/syria/>

⁸⁵ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector," 15.

⁸⁶ Eqtsad, "News of no Russian wheat being bought in a tender announced by the regime," (in Arabic) *Eqtsad*, November 7, 2019. <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/27920/>

exported in Russian-controlled Crimea.⁸⁷ At the same time, Iran is building a highway that would connect them with Iraq, Syria and the Mediterranean.⁸⁸

Regime's structure

The economic sanctions -among other reasons- have reconfigured Syrian trading partnerships. Moreover, it has also influenced Assad's patronage links within the country. This has partially changed the prominence of different interests' groups within the regime, which has a direct impact on the policies they are taking. Joseph Daher in his analysis of the Syrian regime under the Assad's family, describes how Hafez constructed a patrimonial state based on regionalism, tribalism and clientelism. Bashar al-Assad continued and strengthened this nature of the regime although he implemented certain changes. Under his rule, crony capitalists grew in importance together with business groups and higher middle classes.⁸⁹ During the war, this clientelist nature of the regime strengthened. The support of these well-connected groups was recompensated with access to assets, sectors or industries that were once either monopolized by the State or controlled by businessmen who left the country or opposed the regime.⁹⁰ The main change in the regime's patronage networks have been the rise of a new economic elite of traders that made wealth and connections by smuggling products, mainly oil, from Da'esh territories or Kurdish areas to the regime.⁹¹ Assad used these traders as a way to circumvent the economic sanctions. Not only as figureheads of unsanctioned companies but also as smugglers.⁹² Before analyzing the impact of these new alliances on Assad's policies, I will add certain direct implications of the economic sanctions on Syrian economy. The economic sanctions have been specially devastating for the industrial and agricultural sector. They have restricted and limited imports of necessary machinery and spare parts for the reconstruction of production lines and crops.⁹³ These sanctions have made

⁸⁷ Enab Baladi, "Crimea receives the first shipments of Syrian olive oil," (in Arabic) *Enab Baladi*, November 18, 2019. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/343002>

⁸⁸ Caroline Rose, "A highway linking Iraq and Syria becomes an opportunity for Tehran," *Atlantic Council*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-highway-linking-iraq-and-syria-becomes-an-opportunity-for-tehran/>

⁸⁹ Joseph Daher, "Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience," (London: Pluto Press, 2019)

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 318.

⁹¹ Ayman al-Dosouki, "The Emerging Economic Elites in Syria: al-Kattan and al-Qaterji Family as Examples," (in Arabic) *Omran for Strategic Studies*, February 22, 2019.

⁹² Agha, "An Assessment of the Regime's Role and Capability", 89.

⁹³ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector," 12.

it harder for the Syrian economy to develop, which has made it difficult to attract investments in the productive sectors of the economy (industry and agriculture). This has caused the Syrian regime and their economic allies to invest in more profitable and safer sectors in the short-term: namely, finance and real estate.⁹⁴ The economic sanctions and the war economy affected similarly to the regime's composition: it favored traders and smugglers while punished the industrialist economic elites. The next paragraph will describe further these changes.

Before the conflict, Aleppo was Syrian's industrial hub. Most of the industrialists that fled the country came from this city.⁹⁵ Many of these industrialists, now operating businesses mainly from Egypt or Turkey, created a vacuum that a new wave of economic elites filled. As mentioned before, this new wave of economic elites is usually called the 'new traders'. The main example of this trend is the al-Qaterji family. This family enriched itself through smuggling oil to the Syrian regime and now they are reaping their rewards. In November 2019, the regime granted them the concession of new oil refineries and the development of an oil terminal in Tartous.⁹⁶ These new elites are shaping Assad's policies. First, as their main businesses developed around war economy, trading and smuggling, they will favor any measure that maintains the conflict and the smuggling routes on. In this sense, their presence collides with the anti-smuggling stand that the government is taking. Moreover, the interests of this new elite are in conflict with the interests of manufactures and agricultural elites. As an example, in March 2019, the opposition of a group of traders, led by Mohammed Hamsho, was enough to cancel a new imports tax. This tax was one of the government measures to engage in an import substitution program to achieve higher self-sufficiency.⁹⁷ Any protective measure would damage their imports businesses.

Lastly, although the last paragraphs described the changes in the regimen's patronage networks, it is important to acknowledge that the regime is essentially very similar to the one prior to the conflict. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect a continuation of the policies. As described by Adam Hanieh the years prior the Arab uprisings were characterized by Neoliberal

⁹⁴ Agha, "An Assessment of the Regime's Role and Capability", 109.

⁹⁵ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector," 10.

⁹⁶ Eqtsad, "At the request of Bashar Al-Assad .. Qaterji moves from the oil trade to his industries in the coast," (in Arabic) *Eqtsad*, November 26, 2019. <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/28245/>

⁹⁷ Daher, "Syria's manufacturing sector," 15.

policies.⁹⁸ For the Syrian case, Daher called this period “Selective and progressive liberalization”:⁹⁹

The transition from a command economy to crony capitalism was thus accelerated during the 1980s with the gradual abandonment of a centrally directed economy. The new liberalization policies were coupled with new austerity measures in the 1990s. Government spending as a portion of GDP dropped dramatically.¹⁰⁰

These policies increased social inequalities and poverty. Unemployment in 2010 reached 25% and youth unemployment, 45%. Labor force participation decreased, especially for women and rural areas. Informal settlements and slums around urban areas grew while real estate speculation drove the housing prices beyond the means of the average Syrian.¹⁰¹ In the meantime, privatization schemes were creating a new economic elite whose political connections conceded them favoring treatment, concessions and private-public partnerships. The most straight-forward example of continuation of policies is the agricultural case. As we have seen above, the rural sector has been neglected by the recent policies and the measures that the regime has taken have mostly benefited big agriculturalists and those who were enough politically-connected to obtain access to subsidies, oil and seeds. During the 2000, the significance of agriculture in the economy decreased while other sectors -such as Finance or real estate- grew in importance. In 2000, the regime started to privatize state farms that had been collectively-owned for more than forty years. At the same time, a new Agrarian relation law allowed landowners to end tenancy contracts and expel agriculturalist after three years. These measures benefited big landowners and big agribusiness. In 2008, 28% of the farmers were exploiting three quarters of the irrigated land.¹⁰² Not only in agriculture, the liberalization of the economy benefited non-productive sectors of the economy, such as real estate, trade, finance and tourism. In the banking system, politically-connected businessmen, such as Rami Makhoul or Samir Hassan, became mayor shareholders of the first private

⁹⁸ Hanieh, *Lineages of revolt* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

⁹⁹ Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings*, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 24.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 58.

¹⁰² Ibid, 46.

banks.¹⁰³ Even before the war, the Syrian regime was already implementing measures that benefited the sectors such as finance or real estate, while neglecting manufacturing or agriculture. At the same time, they had already engaged in social cuts before the war. Assad's policies maintain certain continuation, replicating neoliberal measures that he has been implementing since he got to power in 2000.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian civil war is unfolding at this very moment. It seems Bashar al-Assad will recover control over Idlib, which will give him greater legitimacy and stronger monopoly of power to continue ruling the territories that he controls. The aim of this paper was three-fold. First, it surveyed the existing literature in Economic policies during post-conflict situations. Second, it examined recent Assad's policies to determine how far or how close these are from achieving an early economic recovery that would contribute to build peace in the country. Third, through a contextual and historical analysis, the paper tried to answer the question: why is Assad not implementing policies towards an early economic recovery? According to the literature in post-conflict economic recovery, Assad is doing very little to achieve a real economic development that would bring peace to his people. For the literature, the first policies should build trust between the two sides of the conflict. To do that, the literature recommends: first, cutting military spending, demobilizing and demilitarizing. Assad has not done any of these but maintains a securitization discourse that allows the regime to continue investing resources in the conflict, forced conscription and makes the population acceptance of inconveniences caused by checkpoints or the great presence of militias. The second policy recommendation is related to transparency and the implementation of the rule of law, which should attract returnees. However, Assad is moving in the opposite direction, he has been expanding legal frameworks in which expropriate or convict any individual accused of supporting the rebels. The third recommendation, prioritizing social policies over macroeconomic matters. According to the literature, these measures should solve deprivation and social inequalities that usually causes the conflict. However, Assad's policies are not solving any of the problems that took people on the streets in 2011. In fact, shortages of gas or electricity are worsening, food and supplies subsidies decreasing, as well as wages.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 43.

One of the main outcomes of these policies is the increasing social inequality between regions and socioeconomic classes in Syria which might increase social tensions. These inequalities and tensions might be increased as well by the kind of investments the regime is carrying out: they are investment mostly in loyalist's areas in real estate, trading or finance, neglecting agriculture and the manufacturing sector. This might cause a narrow and unequal development. We can conclude that the regime is not following these recommendations. The context that they are navigating is at the same time and limitation and an opportunity. The conflict is creating compliance in the population to adopt certain securitization policies, at the same time it has destroyed the economy and the government revenues. The economic sanctions have destroyed economic ties with the EU, for example, but this vacuum has been filled by other regional and international superpowers. Therefore, despite the context, the Syrian regime still has room for maneuver. In this scarcity, the interests groups that formed the government have been paramount. At the same time, much of the old crony capitalists remain intact, but a new elite of traders have raised. For that, the regime is continuing its neoliberal policies prioritizing real estate, tourism and finance over social issues. However, this mentioned 'new traders' are halting certain protectionist measures that would benefit the industrial sector to maintain their businesses based on trading. As mentioned before, Assad's reasons to carry out these policies is a complex matter. It can be studied through many different theoretical frameworks and perspectives. This paper uses an historical perspective with an analysis of the Syrian regime as a network of interests groups. A more comprehensive theoretical framework is needed in future research, but this paper establishes a solid first approach grounded in analyses of very current policies.

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