“Our Real Educated People:” Neoliberalism and Syria’s New Elites

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The Damascus branch of Junior Chamber International (JCI), Syria’s largest entrepreneurship organization for young adults, held its 2008 annual dinner in a large ballroom in Damascus Sheraton on a December Sunday evening. Banquet tables to accommodate approximately 200 attendees formed a semicircle around a wooden dance floor and DJ booth. Four projection screens equipped to play video lined the walls, and professionally-printed programs and annual reports sat at each place setting. Members of JCI and their invited Syrian guests – directors of banks, company owners and representatives of global corporations who financially support JCI’s charitable activities – arrived in large numbers, dropping their European cars with the Sheraton valet. The attire was business formal; men wore crisp suits and patterned ties and women sported cocktail dresses and elaborate hairstyles.

As the guests took their seats, an hour-long program of speeches and award presentations celebrated the organization’s achievements, recognized members for extraordinary efforts and acknowledged the support of Damascus’ businessmen and women. A slick video documentary featured local celebrities like television and radio personalities praising the group for its contributions to the community. In English, a Damascus radio celebrity proclaimed, “it’s not easy what you guys do, not at all.” The outgoing leadership presented formal speeches a year’s worth of activities, and reminded attendees of a sense of group affiliation, proclaiming in English that JCI is “all for one and one for all.” The screens projected snapshots and personal information of members who had won prizes such as “the Dreamer” or “the Entrepreneur.”

In between the formal program, the room buzzed with the conversations of members and guests as groups laughed at their tables, individuals circled around the room greeting friends and colleagues and small groups chatted in the corners.

During the dinner, an elegant and vivacious JCI member, Lana, seated next to me leaned in to remind me how novel an affair like this was for Syria, stressing that there are very few comparable opportunities for Syrians to gather like this. She told me that a decade prior the very existence of JCI would have been unthinkable, and that the success of the dinner and elaborately displayed local celebrity support for it was just another sign of how much Syria had changed. I replied that I too felt the changes in Syria, as new businesses and activities seemed to appear almost every week. Lana nodded in affirmation. She replied that even Syrians had a hard time keeping abreast of the rapid changes around them. She told me, only half jokingly, that if she stayed home and worked for a month or two, before she went out again, she would have to call around to her friends to ask what had transpired in her absence. And the changes, she insisted, went far beyond superficial developments like new nightclubs and boutiques; it extended to social norms about marriage, children and employment. Almost anything, she believed, was subject to change in this energizing atmosphere.

Similar articulations of a rapidly changing Syria surfaced in many of the interactions I had in Syria in the years leading up to the uprisings. Indeed, in those years it was hard to ignore the flourishing of newness at every level of life in Syria. The consensus seemed to be that change had originated from a series of government-led economic reforms and then spread into an eager population who quickly availed themselves of the new opportunities. Political scientists and economists were quick to note that these changes followed a neoliberal turn (see Abboud 2010a, 2010b, 2009; Hinnebusch 2008, 2005; Selvik 2009; Sottimano 2009). At a societal level, urban economic elites who capitalized on these new openings began to coalesce into a new social group: Syria’s neoliberal elite. The group was composed of individual young Syrians in their 20s and 30s who eagerly adopt the ideological component of neoliberal economic changes. They participated in the new associations, businesses, schools, commercial venues, volunteer campaigns, linguistic resources and social outings enabled by official reform. Numerically, the
group did not represent a substantial percentage of society, but the group and its members were visible and influential and thus had an outsized significance, particularly in urban areas. These were the Syrians who embraced the changes and actively positioned themselves to take advantage of them. They developed a feeling of internal cohesion and begin to enjoy external recognition. Significantly, the group was multi-sectarian, incorporating large numbers of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and other sects.

In addition, they began to adapt a social ideology that paralleled the economic ideology of Syria’s neoliberal turn. Beyond their shared institutional affiliations, prominence and social connections, it was the unwavering belief in the following principles that united them:

1) Advocacy for the retreat of the state from service provision and economic leveling mechanisms.  
2) Belief that strengthening the private sector can better society.  
3) Focus on individual responsibility to build “skills” and achieve economic success.  
4) Teleological approach to social development.  
5) Alignment with transnational non-state institutions that promote similar ideals.

They also lived these principles: by flocking to the private sector, by organizing volunteer campaigns to impart “skills” to the less fortunate, by joining entrepreneurship organizations to enhance their own development and by labeling those who did not adopt their ideology as backwards or personally deficient.

In the Syria of the last decade, there was a great deal of movement and adjustment as Syrians from various sectors of society responded to these new circumstances by forming and joining new non-governmental organizations, enrolling in new educational institutions, consuming newly available goods and services, pursuing new private employment and speaking and learning increasingly valuable foreign languages, particularly English. With the excitement and sparkle of the new, however, came the frustration and alienation of exclusion. As engagement with the norms of an organization like JCI create occasions of social mobility, those same norms also act as social barriers. JCI’s annual dinner, for instance, was perceived as unique and new in the Syrian context because it utilized its newly permitted activities and newly venerated wealth to create a sentiment of prestige and exclusivity. The vast majority of Syrians would have felt neither comfortable nor welcome there. Furthermore, the neoliberal ideology that pervaded such occasions carried an additional moral burden for those who felt unwelcome. Since these elites believed that it was the responsibility of individuals to prepare themselves for the more “developed” private sector, it was an individual’s personal shortcoming if they failed to learn and display the norms and credentials to participate.

The economic changes encompassed by Syria’s proclamation of a new, neoliberal “social market economy” – permitting foreign investment, private banking and finance, reducing import tariffs and allowing private education – reflected a free market/neoliberal orientation that privileged urban cosmopolitanism. Yet the benefits of the new economic order permeated Syrian society in uneven and often alienating ways. As Samer Abboud has noted, the regime also reduced or eliminated its subsidies on key commodities such as food stuffs, heating oil and electricity. In other words, the cessation of economic leveling mechanisms means that the gap between rich and poor expanded, as Syrians not experiencing wage increases in the new private sector faced stagnant salaries and rising prices. The end result was that more Syrians suffered under the new system than profited from it.

While no one dynamic is solely responsible for the year and a half of protests and violence in Syria, certainly this rising socio-economic stratification did contribute to the dissatisfaction of so many Syrians. Given that many Syrians understood the prominence of neoliberal elites – whether in private sector employment, private education or civic organizations – as a direct result of regime policies, neoliberal elites could stand as one symbol of the regime’s unjust and exclusionary preferences. Neoliberal elites

1 The regime re-instituted certain subsidies in early 2011, seemingly in attempt to prevent revolts in Tunisia and Egypt from spreading to Syria.
themselves, however, have presented varied responses to the conflict in Syria. I should caution here that I, like many of us, often have had difficulty contacting Syrians in Syria and obtaining information. That said, over the course of the conflict I have had email and private Facebook conversations with several members of the neoliberal elite on their feelings about the conflict. Interestingly, even though they took different political stances (some firmly anti-regime, others firmly pro-regime and still others ambivalent), in all their explanations, they all utilized their shared neoliberal ideological framework to articulate their positions.

Comparing exchanges I had with two young professionals, both Sunni and both well-known members of the neoliberal elite, illuminates this. After noticing that they had been unusually vocal and personal in public Facebook posts about their reactions to the uprisings,\(^2\) I reached out to them via private Facebook messages. The first, Jawad, frequently posted pro-regime sentiments that were unique for their personal content and fervor. I asked him to summarize what was happening in Syria, and he invoked the idea of teleological social progression and blamed the uprisings on Syrians who had failed to develop with the society.

"believe me I’m with what is the best for my country after all, and we all want this, but some areas here are still thinking the old tribe way . . . you actually lived the simplicity and the goodness of our real educated people."

Jawad frames the uprisings as a conflict between those who want Syria to develop and those who maintain an outdated (“tribal”) worldview. Those who oppose the status quo are dismissed as backwards and uneducated, rather than marginalized or disenfranchised. In contrast, Haneen cast the protesters as part of Syria’s development and future. It was the protesters, she believed, who would bring Syria into its next phase of development. She wrote me: “In fact I was about to immigrate . . . because I lost faith in my country's youth and future, but after March 15th I decided to stay, this country deserves to fight for.”

While Jawad and Haneen’s opposing viewpoints caution against any generalizations about elites in Syria, the prominence of the neoliberal elite and the social stratification they represent highlight the importance of incorporating socio-economic factors into any analysis of the strife destroying Syria right now. Economic injustice was a central tool of the regime’s punishing policies and the resentment against it. Socio-economic stratification both overlaps with and diverges from other divisive fault lines in Syria, including sectarianism. As the Arab Spring began in early 2011, observers of Egypt wondered if it were “a revolt against neoliberalism” (Armburst 2011). The answer to that question, of course, will not be a simple yes or no, but we need to take its premise seriously in Syria as well.

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Works Cited


\(^2\) In the early stages of the conflict, most neoliberal elites posted formulaic messages of regime support. After time, the majority stopped posting any messages with explicitly political content, preferring either personal content (baby pictures, birthday announcements) or no content at all.

(Hyperlink: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201122414315249621.html)


