

> Conscious Unconcern:

How the Syrian Regime Abetted Environmental Degradation and Soil Erosion Through Poor Governance

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The Syrian Civil War rages on with reverberations around the globe. Whatever the reasons for the outbreak in protests and revolution may be, these alone cannot explain the deluge of broader problems that beset Syria, which is suffering not only from the horrendous conflict but also from endemic economic and ethnographic issues for almost half a century. A primary cause has been the poor governance practices first by Hafez Al-Assad, and now his son Bashar, which have led Syria into crises that have been averted by their neighbors. It is these crises that have led the country into a Civil War mired in layers of complexity that seems nothing but inescapable. In this paper I will discuss how the Assad regime's misguided endeavors at economy and governance in Raqqa and Hasakah province contributed to problems that will continue to plague Syria beyond the current conflict.

The Fertile Crescent, that follows the Euphrates northeast out of Iraq and curves further east to the coastal plains of Latakia, has provided Syria with ample agricultural output for over 8,000 years. However, much like its water-poor neighbor Jordan, 80% of Syria is prone to desertification. Undeterred by this, Syrians have become accustomed to managing this fragile environmental balance to ensure the continuity of agriculture across the fertile areas of the country. Despite this historical precedent, however, recent developments have severely strained agricultural production and significantly reduced the output from this once arable region with its sufficient water supply. The Syrian Civil War has brought to light the systematic depletion, destruction and the reappropriation of Syria's irrigation systems. The track record, rarely discussed, of the disastrous attempts by the Assad Regime to implement agricultural projects has led to droughts, mass population displacement and the precarious stirring of ethnic conflict across Syria.

The Euphrates or Tabqa Dam project was constructed with the assistance of the Soviet Union between 1968

and 1973 as the largest and longest dam in Syria. It was intended to provide hydroelectric power as well as irrigation on both sides of the Euphrates. Yet the project never achieved its goals in these two areas but instead had several disastrous consequences. First, due to poor planning coupled with the desire to construct a larger rather than a more effective dam, the project ultimately failed at its purpose. It was never able to provide the amount of electricity it was supposed to provide, and to make matters worse, significant agricultural output downriver was devastated due to the new irrigation canals and increased water salinity. Second, the construction of the dam resulted in the displacement of 4,000 Arab families from the area around Lake Assad right into the Syrian Kurdish heartland to the north of the dam. This forced relocation of Arab families was carried out in order to create an "Arab Belt" that would bifurcate Kurdish territories in northern Syria. This "Arab Belt" project was suspended three years later, but the land was never returned to the Kurds and the Arab families remained, resulting in tensions between Arabs and Kurds in the Raqqa and Hasakah areas that has lasted until today.

The erosion of Syrian agriculture would become painfully evident between 2006 and 2010 when Syria experienced what may have been its worst drought in recorded history, leading to the displacement of over 200,000 Syrians from 160 rural villages and their migration to the larger cities in the west of the country. By the time the drought ended, roughly in 2010, the United Nations estimated that it had eradicated the livelihoods of over 800,000 Syrians. The areas most affected by the drought were southern Syria, but mainly the northeastern parts of Hasaka and Raqqa province, commonly known as the Al-Jazira region. So even before the commencement of the Civil War had started, Syria was already facing an internal humanitarian crisis which affected some of the region's most vulnerable, and also one of its most important subgroups: farmers. Syria's

agricultural output may have sharply declined after 2011 due to the conflict, but according to U.N. figures, it had already seen a sharp decline after 2006. That year agricultural output as part of Syria's GDP decreased by 13.5%, and a further 8.7% the following year.

This mass migration of entire villages exacerbated a preexisting trend of migration of rural Syrians to the cities, which had begun with the disastrous Soviet-style central planning of Hafez Al-Assad and continued under the reign of Bashar Al-Assad. Fifty years of sustained incompetence and overambitious agricultural projects resulted in the depletion of the country's land and water resources. It was these initial centralized decisions, beginning in the 1970's under the governance of Hafez Al-Assad that initiated a tradition of incompetence, as well as the negligence to acknowledge this incompetence. The result has been the slow degradation of farmland that had been managed and maintained for millennia. In addition, refugees from conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine contributed to the stress on these already mismanaged resources. As a result, these unemployed and unlanded farmers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees from rural parts of the country overburdened resources and contributed to tensions in the cities in which they settled. The ensuing unrest created by this mass internal displacement is widely considered one of the main factors in the decision of many Syrians to protest against the regime in 2011.

In response to this environmental and social upheaval, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad did little or nothing at all to mitigate the issues at hand. Little care was given to the poorer and majority Sunni areas that were the main victims of the drought and the concomitant loss of livelihood. This segment of Syrian society has a negligible amount of influence in the Syrian state apparatus, and as such could not count on support from the government. The rule of law and the government institutions were notoriously weak and corrupt long before the Civil War began. Anyone who questioned state policy could be imprisoned, tortured and even killed. Furthermore, the Syrian economy had been focused myopically on developing industry and cultivating tourism. These sectors had little to offer the millions of farmers and rural Syrians dependent on agriculture, nor did the relatively lucrative oil and gas industry that was prevalent in many of the rural areas of Hasakah and Raqqqa provinces. Longstanding exclusion from these industries by the regime left the displaced population impoverished and without many options. It is also worth noting that at least one of the ministers in

charge of these destructive economic reforms, is now the Syrian representative at the World Bank, charged with helping to fix Syria's current economy.

The Syrian Civil War brought to the fore the utter devastation of what had always been a fragile but well-managed system of agriculture. Syria does not boast bountiful land and water resources, but its inhabitants had for millennia managed these resources, through turbulent as well as calmer times. It took until 1963, and the implementation of disastrous central planning, disrupting the knowledge and traditions of farmers and inhabitants of rural Syria, to begin the degradation of these systems. Migration and violent conflict certainly contributed to this problem, but the evidence points to a prior cause, an incompetent and negligent government that created the initial problem, as well as these other issues that exacerbated the overall situation. Calamitous, myopic and self-interested central planning have typified the Assad Regime's governance for decades, and will continue as long as he remains in power.

The policy recommendations are as follows:

- **Address Poor Governors:** Too often negligent or incompetent policy-makers remain in power through corrupt regimes. The instance described in the paper concerns the former Syrian Minister who was responsible for a number of disastrous policy decisions, but who is now the envoy of the Syrian Government to the World Bank, charged with revitalizing Syria's economy. Addressing this revolving door by demanding those responsible for catastrophic failures not be involved in International Organization efforts, and by insisting on competent representatives to International Organizations would offer a chance to avoid repeating past mistakes and to prevent systemic corruption from marring attempts of the international community to better nations and their peoples.
- **Link Governance and Environmental Issues:** As in Syria, issues of governance and environmental issues are often not viewed as interdependent. This way of thinking needs to change, and environmental concerns need to be a mandatory criteria of any major government initiative. This consideration will avoid the massive catastrophes we saw in Syria, and environmentally sound policies will help avoid the myriad adverse side-effects that come as a result of not considering the environmental consequences of major decisions.

- **Prioritize Sustainability and Productivity:** With regard to the return of refugees to their homes, in Syria or in any other situation in which large numbers of persons were displaced, sustainability and productivity of the land should be the primary concern. Whether or not there is shelter or humanitarian aid present, if there is a lack of arable land or a lack of economic activity or viability, there is

no real incentive for displaced people to return. Therefore in order to incentivize the return of displaced persons and also to make their return viable and sustainable, these environmental and economic factors need to be addressed immediately and prioritized in a post-conflict scenario.