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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Topological twists in the Syrian conflict: Re-thinking space through bread

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Abstract

This article seeks to question the epistemological monopoly of territory and scale in analyses of the Syrian conflict. It does so to both challenge static conceptualisations of space in the study of politics and analyse how seemingly remote actors influence wartime outcomes. Since 2011, NGOs, government bodies, and merchants have worked to connect Damascus to Tehran, Idlib to Istanbul, London to Dara'a. These connections have proven crucial to the reliable supply of food, funds, and firepower. Yet rather than reveal the importance of foreign patrons or proxies on the ground, such dynamics speak to a world in which relationships matter more than distance, practices more than geopolitical position or *a priori* forms of alliance. Drawing on the work of John Allen, I suggest why thinking topologically about these dynamics better equips us to understand the political outcomes they help engender. To demonstrate the promise of this approach, I hone in on the partnerships, intermediaries, and connections that shape performances of political authority in Syria by examining one object crucial to its enactment: bread.

Keywords: Space; Topologies; Syria; Civil War; Food Politics

Introduction

In May 2016, the price of bread in the Syrian province of Idlib suddenly skyrocketed. The abrupt increase came without warning. Residents of this opposition-controlled enclave woke up to find that prices of the foodstuff had doubled, even tripled or quadrupled in certain areas. What drove the sudden increase? A poor agricultural season in Idlib's hinterlands was not to blame: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reported that in 2015 Syria had its best rainfall in a decade, producing a far superior wheat crop than the dismal drought-induced output of 2016.[1] Nor were municipal administrators at fault. Just the previous year, local governance councils in Idlib had established a single, uniform price for bread throughout the province, mimicking a longstanding subsidy programme administered by the Syrian government.[2] The ostensibly impersonal market or a sudden influx of displaced persons was not the culprit either. Demand for bread was exactly the same as the previous day. Instead, the price rise can be more accurately traced to a decision made far from the conflict's messy frontlines: Washington, DC.

In early 2015, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) for the United States' Agency for International Development (USAID) opened an investigation into cross-border programmes

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sending humanitarian aid from Turkey and Jordan into Syria. These programmes distributed medicine, flour, and other humanitarian supplies to residents of opposition-held enclaves. The province of Idlib had been one of its main recipients. Oversight of these programmes presented constant headaches. Those involved noted challenges resulting from the inability to directly monitor aid distribution, transparency concerns regarding commercial tenders for supplies and nepotism by contractors, among others. The potential for fraudulent and unscrupulous practices was high. In May 2016, the OIG acknowledged the discovery of a 'network of commercial vendors, NGO employees, and others who have colluded to engage in bid-rigging and multiple bribery and kickback schemes related to contracts to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria'.[3] Upon this discovery, USAID asked certain NGOs to halt procurement of supplies and suspend a portion of aid deliveries.

At the centre of the OIG's investigation was GOAL, Ireland's largest international nongovernmental humanitarian aid organisation. GOAL was also the largest distributor of flour to Idlib province at the time of the inquiry, providing supplies to approximately 20 per cent of the province's bakeries. The inquiry forced GOAL to suspend these shipments. Without the steady supply of flour to which bakers and local governing bodies had grown accustomed, the price of bread rose steeply, drastically altering the subsistence patterns in several of Idlib's communities. I am not interested in this story for its sensationalist details or the clear lack of political acumen it demonstrates, but because it poses important questions regarding how ostensibly 'external' actors reach into Syria and shape key developments inside the country. How can we understand the confluence of forces shaping the country's conflict? More specifically, what analytical prisms can illuminate the ways in which decisions taken at a geometric distance impact Syrian lives and the political manoeuvres that surround them?

In order to address these questions, and problematise certain assumptions in the study of politics more broadly, this article seeks to interrogate the epistemological monopoly of territory and scale in relation to analyses of the Syrian conflict. Both the 'spatial fetish of territory'[4] and the failure to distinguish 'between scale as a category of *practice* and category of *analysis*'[5] distract attention from equally, if not more important entanglements and interconnections shaping the lives of Syrians. Since the escalation of violence in late 2011, a broad array of 'foreign' actors has folded into Syria, connecting people and places together across the shortest and longest of distances. Donations from charitable organisations to besieged communities, transactions among commodity traders and government agencies tie imperial cores with hitherto unknown Levantine villages; Turkish border posts with Ukrainian wheat markets; Lebanese ports with blockaded Syrian towns. These linkages are far from banal. They shape the lives of Syrians, not to mention shifts and exchanges on the battlefield. Yet their importance is not well captured by conceptions of the modern international that have come to monopolise Anglo-American international relations. Nor are they more accurately portrayed as the product of regional rivalries among states and their 'proxies' on the ground.[6] In both cases, sweeping generalisations grounded in popular dogmas (anarchy, sectarianism, power politics), severely inhibit attention to crucial

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[3]Wayne O'Connor, 'Goal staff removed from duty after USAID inquiry', *Independent.ie*, available at: {https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/news/goal-staff-removed-from-duty-after-us-aid-inquiry-34696957.html} accessed 10 October 2018; Ann Calvaresi Barri, 'Fraud Investigations Expose Weaknesses in Syria Humanitarian Aid Programs', Testimony before the committee on foreign affairs subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, United States House of Representatives (14 July 2016), available at: {https://oig.usaid.gov/node/132} accessed 4 July 2018.

[4]Daniel Neep, 'State-space beyond territory: Wormholes, gravitational fields, and entanglement', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 30:3 (2017), pp. 466–95.

[5]Adam Moore, 'Rethinking scale as a geographical category: From analysis to practice', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32:2 (2008), pp. 203–25.

[6]Geraint Alun Hughes, 'Syria and the perils of proxy warfare', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25:3 (2014), pp. 522–38; Christopher Phillips, 'Eyes bigger than stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria', *Middle East Policy*, 24:1 (2017), pp. 36–47.

empirical processes. We deduce that lines of support, assistance, and hostility do not respond to the borderlines of the interstate system or straightforward scalar boundaries, yet such details are rarely pursued for what they can tell us about space, or pondering spatiality differently. Conventional geometries of power seem particularly difficult to shake off.[7] To remedy such lacunae, this article draws on insights from critical human geography to think 'topologically' about the proximate and distant relationships shaping the lives of Syrians. In particular, it seeks to expand the ways we conceptualise the multiple connections that work to produce political authority by honing in on one object crucial to its enactment: bread.

This article will demonstrate the promise of such an approach in four parts. It begins by offering a critique of the spatial assumptions that underpin much of the literature produced on the Syrian war, outlining what prevalent frameworks elide in their analysis. In the second section, an alternative is put forth. Drawing on the work of John Allen, I suggest why thinking topologically better equips us to understand articulations of political authority in the country. The third and fourth sections analyse bread provision during the Syrian conflict to illustrate the utility of this approach, highlighting the partnerships, intermediaries, and connections that subsume this crucial governing practice in two very different parts of Syria. The more fluid set of relationships to be explored will make clear why prevalent conceptualisations of space are not up to the task.

Drawing on scholarly and personal knowledge of the country, I attempt to assess wartime governance and food provision without direct access to Syria since 2011, due to security restrictions. Research was conducted between 2013–18. It draws on in-depth interviews (n = 83) conducted by email, video conferencing, instant messaging and telephone conversations with civilians, activists, Local Coordination Committee (LCC) members, traders, government officials, and journalists. Many were interviewed on more than one occasion. The article additionally benefits from a robust qualitative sample of respondents collected outside of Syria, which includes interviews (n = 92) with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, many of whom remain in contact with relatives in the country and some of whom travel back to Syria regularly. I supplement interview data with secondary source literature and open-source material ranging from NGO and international organisations' reports to newspapers and YouTube videos. Almost all informants inside Syria asked to remain anonymous in view of the personal and professional risks involved in providing information on the topics discussed. Due to these constraints, I use pseudonyms and anonymous quotes for information collected in confidential interviews. Unlike much of the current civil war scholarship, I have shunned the search for ostensibly value-free data so as to conduct a large-N analysis. There are certain questions that conducting interviews or surveys from afar simply cannot claim to answer. The assertions made herein should all be considered in light of the serious limitations on qualitative research inside Syria. Undoubtedly, lacunae are rife and further research is needed.

Territorial and scalar attachments

Perhaps the most ubiquitous limitation in analyses of the Syrian conflict are approaches that reify territory or scale as ontological entities. In the former, territories are partitioned and parcelled into bounded units of authority and control. Whether 'controlled' by the opposition or the Assad regime, they are portrayed as a 'series of blocks'[8] across which power flows effortlessly, as in the colour-coded maps of territorial jurisdiction so often deployed to represent the current state of the conflict. In the latter, local, national, and regional scales are assumed; the question is simply one of identifying the level at which political processes of interest operate.[9] Both

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[7]John Allen, *Topologies of Power: Beyond Territory and Networks* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 131.

[8]John Agnew, 'The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of International Relations theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1:1 (1994), pp. 53–80.

[9]For an extended version of this critique, see Moore, 'Rethinking scale', pp. 203–25.

approaches are underpinned by a strict, Euclidean geometry. They treat spatial categories as given rather than produced. Resulting analyses leave us with a familiar sense of flat landscapes with identifiable centers. Boundaries divide and enclose space. Power over jurisdictions can be located and extended over distances that can be measured and delineated. Importantly, authority in this geometric arrangement is exercised *over* bounded territorial plots or neatly demarcated scales. Such assumptions impact less our understanding of '*the facts on the ground*' – Who? What? Where? – than the efforts to analyse – Why? How? – what is going on. Put simply, we cannot account for the 'spatial reworkings of authority' that shape so much of what goes on around us today.[10]

Take, for example, Sam Heller, a Century Foundation Fellow and one of the more prominent American analysts of the Syrian conflict. In a 2017 article, Heller argues against the trope that Syria had devolved into an indiscernible muddle. He posits instead that a relational analysis of various actors in the war reveals coherent patterns of action. 'There are dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individual factions and sub-factions vying for control of part or all of Syria … yet those thousands of elements aren't somehow just bouncing off each other like atoms.'[11] He continues, 'They move in identifiable patterns, drawn along by how they're linked to each other and to a handful of international poles.' But how should we understand the linkages and poles to which they are tied? 'We have to think in terms of what you could call the "center"', Heller argues. 'All elements and players in Syria are defined to some extent, by their relationship to the national Syrian state in Damascus – the center.' Heller's recourse to a 'center' as the necessary nodal point by which any part of Syria gains relevance assumes that space is a flat, undifferentiated surface. State power either extends outwards or fails to do so, shaping all else in its path. His analysis neglects that 'centers' of government are multiple and that what requires explanation are the very practices through which Damascus is able to 'act *as* a centre'.[12] Despite his detailed knowledge of micro-level developments, especially in difficult to access opposition-controlled enclaves, Heller's account remains wedded to an outmoded spatial geometry.

Scholarly accounts in international relations suffer from similar limitations. In his detailed account of the 'external factors' fueling *The Battle for Syria*, Christopher Phillips argues that narratives focused on the internal dynamics fueling the war are insufficient. Rather, the conflict 'simply cannot be explained without a detailed understanding of the international dimension'.[13] Six countries (Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, US) form the basis of his account. While Phillips seeks to emphasise the 'interaction of internal and external actors',[14] he repeatedly recurs to a rigid spatial geometry in which there are clearly demarcated, qualitatively different 'insides' and 'outsides'. Whereas Phillips sharply observes the intricacies of Qatari financial assistance and Russian military support, the practices that make it so that resources can be felt by Syrians are invariably subjected to a preconceived map of the world. The national scale pre-determines units of analysis, and the power of foreign patrons extends almost effortlessly across space. Although Phillips seems quite cognisant that neither political influence nor the exercise of power correspond to such fixed moorings, these inklings are never exploited for what they could reveal about spatiality, or thinking about space differently. Syria remains a fixed territorial platform upon which nefarious machinations occur, a mere stage upon which an international political drama plays out.[15]

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[10]John Allen, 'Topological twists: Power's shifting geographies', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 1:3 (2011), pp. 283–98.
[11]Sam Heller, 'The Signal in Syria's Noise', War on the Rocks (30 June 2017), available at: {https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/the-signal-in-syrias-noise/} accessed 24 July 2017.
[12]Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, 'Political power beyond the state: Problematics of government', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61:s1 (2010), pp. 271–303, emphasis in original.
[13]Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 3.
[14]Ibid., p. 8.
[15]For a historically nuanced account that more fully complicates relationships between 'foreign' actors and the Syrian elites and groups who solicit outside support to further their cause, see Eberhard Kienle, 'The new struggle for Syria and the nature

These spatial suppositions are not limited to scholars of international relations. In his insightful *Morbid Symptoms*, Gilbert Achcar unpacks the funding of Islamist groups by the Gulf oil monarchies. He surmises that, 'the only counter-revolutionary option was therefore for Riyadh to co-opt the uprising along with Doha'.[16] The extension of power from an identifiable location here is thoroughly unproblematic. Qatari and Saudi Arabian intentions easily infiltrate Syria by funding local allies. Achcar moves further in this direction when he emphasises how 'networks of private donors and fundraisers, as well as institutional and religious networks', from the Gulf all 'contributed to tilting the balance among the Syrian dissidents' towards those waving a 'Sunni-sectarian banner'.[17] None of this is incorrect, yet we are left without a sense of how exactly Syrian political actors are drawn close, which practices of reach were employed by Gulf monarchies and religious groups to minimise distance so that their ostensible allies could draw on resources at their disposal.[18] Although the impact of such funding may very well correspond to what Achcar details, emphasising foreign supporters or obscure religious networks are of little help when it is the practices through which these actors exert leverage and influence, rather than the resources that lie behind them, that one wishes to understand. My point here is not that external allies or financial assistance are irrelevant as variables, but that notions of space premised on territory or scale are far too blunt an instrument through which to comprehend how they are *made* relevant in practice. Of course, some scholars have proven more sensitive to the connections and spatial practices crucial to deploying resources and enacting political authority in Syria.[19] Yet for many, an over-reliance on territorial or scalar imaginaries means the ability of different actors to exercise reach and enact leverage or presence is too often assumed, rather than explained. Spatial binaries such as national/international, inside/outside, local/global can only take us so far.[20] They conceal a world of complexity, distort an array of sociospatial processes and obscure the intricate relationships that shape articulations of political authority.

Turning to topologies

In his essay compilation *The Impossible Revolution*, Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh reflects upon the tangible presence of external actors in Syria after watching Islamist forces seize the Bab al-Hawa crossing near the Turkish border. 'It became clear that the conflict was no longer contained within Syrian borders', he asserts, 'but had spilled over to regional and international

of the Syrian state', in Ali Kadri and Linda Matar (eds), *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), pp. 53–70.

[16]Gilbert Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 44.

[17]Ibid.

[18]For a fascinating account of how exactly the Gulf monarchies went about distributing resources to Syrian allies, see Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria* (London: Oneworld, 2018).

[19]Paul Anderson, 'Beyond Syria's war economy: Trade, migration and state formation across Eurasia', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 10:1 (2019), pp. 75–84; Ali Hamdan, 'Breaker of barriers? Notes on the geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham', *Geopolitics*, 21:3 (2016), pp. 605–27; Reinoud Leenders and Kholoud Mansour, 'Humanitarianism, state sovereignty, and authoritarian regime maintenance in the Syrian War', *Political Science Quarterly*, 133:2 (2018), pp. 225–58; Leïla Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict', *International Affairs*, 93:4 (2017), pp. 809–27; Leïla Vignal, 'Produire, consommer, vivre: les pratiques économiques du quotidien dans la Syrie en guerre (2011–2018)', *Critique internationale*, 80:3 (2018), pp. 45–65.

[20]Recent work by historians and geographers has pushed strongly against the use of such binaries in the study of the Middle East. Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, 'On forgotten shores: Migration in Middle East studies and the Middle East in migration studies', *Mashriq & Mahjar*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 1–7; Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (eds), *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012); Karen Culcasi, 'Mapping the Middle East from within: (Counter-) cartographies of an Imperialist construction', *Antipode*, 44:4 (2012), pp. 1099–118; Nile Green, 'Rethinking the "Middle East" after the Oceanic turn', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34:3 (2014), pp. 556–64; Deen Sharp, 'Difference as practice: Diffracting geography and the area studies turn', *Progress in Human Geography* (2018), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518788954}.

borders, with its sectarian dimension gaining momentum and intensity'.[21] Later on, Saleh laments that, 'Syria has become a no-homeland, exposed to every kind of incursion.'[22] Yet the question remains: How can such 'incursions' and the political outcomes they work to engender be understood? The driving insight behind thinking topologically is that power relationships are not so much located in certain scalar containers or extended easily across territory but work instead to arrange the places of which they are a part.[23] Space becomes a process in the making,[24] one that takes its form and contours through a mix of elements, 'some close by, others folded in from afar'.[25] Distance based on geographical location ceases being a given, lines of control and assistance can no longer be mapped based on extension. This is not to argue that there are no territorial or scalar logics at play in the practices through which actors seek to accrue influence and exercise power.[26] Rather, it is to postulate that such perspectives take for granted the very phenomena they seek to scrutinise. They assume that power assembles in time and place rather than explaining how actors are able to employ resources and capabilities so as to 'make their presence felt through relations of proximity and reach'.[27] In this respect, the explanatory potential of topological approaches lies in their orientation towards 'the specific relations in play',[28] and to the twists and turns through which actors make their presence felt in the here and now of daily life.

From borders[29] and NGOs[30] to the study of debt ecologies[31] and the spread of market rationality to unexpected locales,[32] topological approaches have been deployed in relation to a host of empirical concerns.[33] Here I want to foreground its utility for thinking about the various ways in which political authority, through brief examples related to bread provision, is performed – examining how institutions, materials, and practices coalesce to create articulations of power that 'can only be disentangled or unfolded heuristically'.[34] While problematising the elegant boundedness of state sovereignty, political geographers have demonstrated how relational conceptualisations of space better allow us to explore manifestations of political authority that do not correspond to a territorial or scalar template.[35] Their work has illustrated how territory and scale emerge as the

[21]Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible Revolution* (London: Haymarket Books, 2017), p. 14.

[22]Ibid., p. 187.

[23]John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); John Allen, 'Three spaces of power: Territory, networks, plus a topological twist in the tale of domination and authority', *Journal of Power*, 2:2 (2009), pp. 197–212.

[24]Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 180.

[25]John Allen, 'A more than relational geography?', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2:2 (2012), p. 192.

[26]I thank Tamer Elshayal for reminding me of this crucial point.

[27]Allen, *Topologies of Power*, p. 51.

[28]Penelope Harvey, 'The topological quality of infrastructural relation: an ethnographic approach', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29:4–5 (2012), p. 89.

[29]Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, 'Between inclusion and exclusion: On the topology of global space and borders', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29:4–5 (2012), pp. 58–75.

[30]John Allen, 'Topological twists', pp. 283–98.

[31]Christopher Harker, 'Debt space: Topologies, ecologies and Ramallah, Palestine', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35:4 (2017), pp. 600–19.

[32]Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[33]Lauren Martin and Anna J. Secor, 'Towards a post-mathematical topology', *Progress in Human Geography*, 38:3 (2014), pp. 420–38.

[34]Harker, 'Debt space', p. 601; John Allen and Allan Cochrane, 'The urban unbound: London's politics and the 2012 Olympic Games', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38:5 (2014), pp. 1609–24.

[35]John Agnew, 'Sovereignty regimes: Territoriality and state authority in contemporary world politics', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:2 (2005), pp. 437–61; James Anderson, 'The shifting stage of politics: New medieval and postmodern territorialities?', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14:2 (1996), pp. 133–53; Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, 'The social construction of state sovereignty', in Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds), *State Sovereignty as a Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1–21; Fiona McConnell, *Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

product of socio-technical and discursive practices.[36] Yet even in many of these works, as well as among those working in the actor-network tradition, there remains a sense of a flattened landscape through which power and resources travel, a 'series of lines and connections extended horizontally from site to site across an even landscape'.[37] In contrast, topological analysis emphasises the 'qualitative properties of space (as opposed to the geometric)',[38] where it is the way things and actors are related that matters, not just the fact of their networked connection. It does not disregard the tracking of networks or the examination of organisational advantages or resources but rather seeks to hone in on the processes and embodied practices through which these come to matter.

By foregrounding process, relation, and connection, topological thinking can help us unpack how political authority is practised and assembled, often in ways that defy conventional mappings. Rather that locate power in institutions or geographic containers, we can begin to think about how technologies of government coalesce as part of a spatial arrangement in which private agencies, NGOs, foreign governments, and local organisations all exercise powers of reach through which they seek to make their presence felt.[39] Performances of political authority emerge here not simply from the deployment of resources or *de jure* sovereignty but from a 'multiplicity of modes of connection, continuity and discontinuity',[40] and the situated arrangements and relationships in which they are expressed. In the case of Syria, thinking topologically entails approaching opposition and regime-held territories not as *a priori* geographic units connected to foreign patrons, but as non-bounded sites in a constant process of creation, shifting attention to the practices that shape the terms of political encounter in specific places.[41] The crucial point is that to account for articulations of political authority, we need to explore 'a more *transverse* set of political interactions', than the static conceptions of space with which we operate tend to allow.[42]

Bread provision in wartime Syria

A longstanding governmental practice through which the Assad led Ba'thist (1970–) regime performs political authority is the provision of discounted bread. Since the early 1970s, the Syrian government has supported wheat production and subsidised retail prices for what is popularly known as *khubz al-dawla* (bread of the state).[43] While the proportion of government expenditures allotted to education, public employment, and pensions were reduced considerably following Bashar al-Assad's accession to the presidency in 2000 and the subsequent turn towards a 'social market economy', oil and food subsidies remained stable,[44] accounting for nearly 15

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[36]Two excellent examples of this work include Rhys Jones and Peter Merriman, 'Network nation', *Environment and Planning A*, 44:4 (2012), pp. 937–53; Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[37]Allen, *Topologies of Power*, p. 29.

[38]Anna Secor, '2012 Urban Geography Plenary lecture – Topological City', *Urban Geography*, 34:4 (2013), p. 431.

[39]Allen, 'Three spaces of power', p. 208.

[40]Martin and Secor, 'Towards a post-mathematical topology', p. 431.

[41]Ali Hamdan, 'War, place, and the transnational', *Mashriq & Mahjar*, 5:1 (2018), pp. 127–31; Ali Hamdan, 'Thoughts from the provinces', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49:2 (2017), pp. 331–4.

[42]John Allen and Allan Cochrane, 'Assemblages of state power: Topological shifts in the organization of government and politics', *Antipode*, 42:5 (2010), p. 1073.

[43]Wheat production was supported by subsidising key inputs (fertiliser, seeds, fuel). The government set retail prices for wheat and managed the harvest through 140 collection centres dotted throughout the country. A state-run enterprise (General Company for Mills) was the primary flour miller. For more on how control over and administration of the material needs of populations can function as an effective basis of rulership and control, see Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[44]While bread retail prices remained subsidised, certain parts of the supply chain were outsourced. By 2011, the government owned 26 mills but it also contracted 35 private millers to bolster flour production. For more, see Ghada Ahmed, 'Syria Wheat Value Chain and Food Security', *Duke University Minerva Policy Briefs*, 8 (2016), pp. 1–10.

per cent of government spending prior to the outbreak of protests in 2011.[45] Since the escalation of violence later that year, the Assad regime has treated the bread subsidy as an unquestionable governmental obligation towards its citizenry.[46] And while opposition actors (*mu'ārida*), whether in the form of revolutionary councils (*majālis thawriyye*), armed factions (*faṣā'il*) or the various exiled groups ostensibly representing opposition-held Syria, have gone to great lengths to upend the regime's governmental practices, almost all have sought to emulate the provision of discounted bread.[47] Not even those groups most openly inclined to enacting diametrically opposed models of government, such as *Jaysh al-Islam* and the Islamic State, have spurned the allure of the Assad regime's longstanding practice of daily nourishment.

They have done so because subsidising bread shapes patterns of domination and belonging while forming the contours of community.[48] In Syria, it remains a crucial mechanism through which political authority is performed, a technology of government that shapes relations between rulers and ruled. Yet securing the wheat and flour necessary for enacting this welfare programme has become an arduous challenge, for both opposition groups and the Assad regime. The burning of crops during battle, the displacement of farmers, rising fuel costs, and the scarcity of other inputs (seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides) have combined to drastically alter the country's agricultural landscape.[49] Once self-sufficient in wheat, the country's output declined from 4.913 million tonnes in 2010 to 1.3 million tonnes in 2016.[50] Unsurprisingly, bread prices have seen dramatic fluctuations.[51] Nevertheless, both the Assad regime and various opposition groups have gone to great lengths to stabilise bread supply in areas they seek to control.[52] How have they done so? Through what links, connections, and practices is the provision of bread pursued and political authority performed?

Defying distance: Bread provision in Assad-controlled Syria

By the end of 2012, the Assad regime had lost control of a vast swathe of arable lands to the Free Syrian Army. Farmers in parts of the country under its control were often unable to transport their wheat harvests to regime-held silos. With strategic stocks in the latter diminishing rapidly,

[45]Clemens Breisinger, Olivier Ecker, Perrihan Al-Raffai, and Yu Bingxin, 'Beyond the Arab Awakening: Policies and Investments for Poverty Reduction and Food Security', Food Policy Reports, 25 (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute 2012).

[46]For more on how this process plays out in neighbouring Jordan, see José Ciro Martínez, 'Leavening neoliberalization's uneven pathways: Bread, governance and political rationalities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan', *Mediterranean Politics*, 22:4 (2017), pp. 464–83.

[47]Wheat silos and flour mills also functioned as an important 'source of profit and hence of tension between armed groups'. For more, see Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 193, 248; Martínez and Eng, 'Struggling to perform the state', pp. 130–47.

[48]Larbi Sadiki, 'Popular uprisings and Arab democratization', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32:1 (2000), pp. 71–95; José Ciro Martínez, 'Leavened apprehensions: Bread subsidies and moral economies in Hashemite Jordan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 50:2 (2018), pp. 173–93; Jessica Barnes and Mariam Taher, 'Care and conveyance: Buying Baladi bread in Cairo', *Cultural Anthropology*, 34:3 (2019), pp. 417–43.

[49]Brent Eng and José Ciro Martínez, 'Starvation, Submission and Survival: Syria's War through the Prism of Food', Middle East Report, 273 (2014), pp. 28–32.

[50]'Syrian Wheat 2015: Analytical Study', Syrian Economic Forum (May 2015), available at: {http://www.syrianef.org/assets/policy_papers/english/syrian_wheat_en.pdf} accessed 10 May 2018; Michael Gregory and Maha el Dahan, 'Exclusive: Syrian Wheat to Fall Far Short of Government Forecast – Sources' (30 June 2017), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-wheat/exclusive-syrian-wheat-crop-to-fall-far-short-of-government-forecast-sources-idUSKBN19L1KZ} accessed 10 November 2018.

[51]Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, 'Syria's Conflict Economy', IMF Working Paper 16.123, available at: {https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf} accessed 25 August 2018.

[52]José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, 'Stifling stateness: the Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance', *Security Dialogue*, 49:4 (2018), pp. 235–53.

shortages of bread were feared. The implementation of economic sanctions by the European Union and the United States in mid-2012 further hampered the Assad regime's ability to address the expected shortfall through imports. While these sanctions did not restrict the import of food-stuffs, banking restrictions and asset freezes meant many companies were unwilling to do business with the Syrian government. As a result, it was forced to fill the growing import gap through an array of mechanisms. Most of the time, the General Establishment for Cereal Process and Trade (HOBOOB), the body charged with overseeing the wheat supply chain, announces international purchasing tenders. These target companies and traders in Eastern European countries, suppliers unaffected or not discouraged by sanctions. On other occasions, when such tenders are unsuccessful, the regime subcontracts wheat acquisition to Lebanese traders and shipping companies. The latter act as middlemen in order to conceal a ship's final destination.[53] To finance these purchases, the regime repeatedly drew on Russian and Iranian credit lines. Through such links, along with the early manipulation of UN food relief programmes, government authorities were able to prevent food shortages while checking inflationary pressures during the first three years of the conflict.[54] Ruthless repression of opponents was carefully combined with strategic provision to selected communities.

In 2014, following the Islamic State's conquest of much of Raqqa province, further shifts were required. With little access to the products of Syria's agricultural heartland and major grain silos in the northwest,[55] prominent government officials promised to use a second $1 billion Iranian credit line issued in 2015 to 'secure the flow of essential goods and materials'.[56] The Islamic Republic has also repeatedly sent large deliveries of food and humanitarian supplies to the port of Latakia.[57] In spite of these resources, shortages were feared and stocks ran low, as the conflict severely disrupted supply chains.[58] Despite the closure of more than half the country's bakeries, the destruction of fertiliser and yeast factories as well as seed distribution offices and wheat silos, the Assad regime has been able to supply government-controlled parts of Syria with discounted flour for almost the entirety of the conflict. Yet, its proficiency in supplying bread cannot be simply assumed by virtue of its alliances with Russia or Iran. Rather, efforts were made to bring 'people and things together in new configurations' to ensure this outcome.[59] The array of catalysing forces involved are numerous. Before wheat arrives in Syria, Ukrainian farmers plant seeds distributed by local companies and government bodies. Labourers then harvest wheat before sending supplies to ports on the Black Sea. After arriving in Latakia or Beirut, wheat is disbursed to silos for storage or government-owned mills to be converted into flour,

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[53]Jonathan Saul, 'Exclusive – Assad allies profit from Syria's lucrative food trade', *Reuters* (15 November 2013), available at: {https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-food-exclusive/exclusive-assad-allies-profit-from-syrias-lucrative-food-trade-idUKBRE9AE05V20131115} accessed 23 February 2018.

[54]During 2013, subsidised bread cost 25 pounds in regime-controlled areas while prices in other areas of the country fluctuated between 80–300 pounds. Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria*, p. 254; José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, 'The unintended consequences of emergency food aid: Neutrality, sovereignty and politics in the Syrian civil war, 2012–15', *International Affairs*, 92:1 (2016), pp. 153–73.

[55]Prior to 2011, the majority of 140 wheat silos were in the Jazira region. Following the Islamic State's takeover of the region, only 22 remained in operation in the rest of the country. Maha El Dahan, 'Syrian food crisis deepens as war chokes farming', *Reuters* (26 April 2016), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-wheat/syrian-food-crisis-deepens-as-war-chokes-farming-idUSKCN0XN0G0} accessed on 22 February 2018.

[56]Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Sylvia Westall, 'Syria ratifies fresh $1 billion credit line from Iran', *Reuters* (8 July 2015), available at: {http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/08/us-mideast-crisis-syria- iran-idUSKCN0PI1RD20150708} accessed on 22 February 2018.

[57]AP, Damascus, 'Syria: Iran sends 30,000 tons of food supplies', *al-Arabiya* (8 April 2014), available at: {http://english. alarabiya.net/en/business/2014/04/08/Syria-Iran-sends-30-000-tons-of-food-supplies.html} accessed 2 November 2017.

[58]'Food Insecurity in War-Torn Syria: From Decades of Self-Sufficiency to Food Dependence', Carnegie Middle East Center (4 June 2015), available at: {http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/06/04/food-insecurity-in-war-torn-syria-from-decades-of-self-sufficiency-to-food-dependence-pub-60320} accessed 5 June 2017.

[59]Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 75.

which is then distributed to local bakeries where *khubz al-dawla* is produced. None of the forces, both human and non-human, act alone in this process. Their efficacy, so that wheat produced in far way Ukrainian farms feeds hungry Syrians, 'always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces',[60] that stretch and twist across geometric distances.

Who are some of the key actors in this process? Consider, for example, the prominent role played by regime-aligned businessman in the import of wheat. Large suppliers have been increasingly unwilling to transport bulk shipments to Syria. As all exports to the country are subject to numerous restrictions and regulations, fewer companies are willing to implement the controls needed to ensure full compliance, driving down the size of trades. With many public sector organisations under sanction or lacking in liquidity, Syrian laws were modified to allow for private sector companies to import products that were once the sole purview of the government.[61] New companies connected to influential businessmen such as Rami Makhlouf and Ayman Jaber quickly emerged.[62] These companies parse the market for food supplies and take on the risks that container-shipping firms, larger banks, and grain traders are unwilling to countenance. Others, such as the Aman Group, work as brokers for grain deals for the government agency (HOBOOB) charged with wheat procurement. By purchasing commodity contracts on its behalf, the group, run by the Foz family from Latakia, profits from generous commissions while concealing the purchaser of the cereals. Through ties to these brokers and businessmen, the Assad regime establishes a connection with purveyors of grain, which did not sell their goods to the previously self-sufficient Syrian market. At a time when it was cheaper to bring wheat from the Black Sea than the province of Hasakah due to internal levies enacted by armed groups,[63] this sleight of hand allows the Assad regime to shift risks and rewards beyond the regulatory reach of sanctions. As one wheat trader based in Beirut put it: 'You never quite know whom you are dealing with, and that is the point.'[64]

Through the creation of front companies, newfangled shipping lines and discreet commercial links, a circumspect logistics network quickly emerged around the commerce of grain, one that only procured wheat but also generated large profits for allied businessmen. The latter have 'taken on greater roles in facilitating trade and payments', frequently acting as a front for government agencies unable to import goods.[65] By acquiring enough grain to ensure bread supply, they both shield residents from inflation driven by the erosion of the Syrian pound's value and enable the regime to maintain the fiction of seamless provision to those living in areas under its control.[66] A father of four in the Damascene district of Abu Jarash underlined the importance of such outcomes: 'There is no way I could feed my family without subsidized bread (*khubz al-dawla*). Inflation has affected everyone and there are some foods we no longer buy but bread is essential. The regime knows this and always provides it.'[67] The capacity of the regime to call partners into new alignments so as to draw in resources turns on its adeptness at folding in seemingly distant resources in line with perceived necessities and the demands of rapidly

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[60]Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 21.

[61]Samer Abboud, 'The Economics of War and Peace in Syria: Stratification and Factionalization in the Business Community', The Century Foundation (31 January 2017), available at: {https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/} accessed 26 August 2018.

[62]Saul, 'Exclusive – Assad allies profit from Syria's lucrative food trade'.

[63]For more on these armed levies and their impact on Syrian wheat imports, see FAO and WFP, 'FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic' (14 November 2016), available at: {http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6445e.pdf} accessed 23 November 2018.

[64]Personal interview, Anonymous 1, 24 July 2014.

[65]Carnegie Middle East Center, 'Food Insecurity in War-Torn Syria'.

[66]While certain businessman may manipulate the regime's effort in order to bolster their own interests, they do not break the continuity of relationships 'stretched to achieve a particular goal'. Allen, *Topologies of Power*, p. 52.

[67]Skype interview, Anonymous 2, 12 August 2015.

changing situations. The gap between near and far is bridged by relationships and mediated practices of reach; distance is but a product of such interactions.

Faced with challenges brought about by sanctions and conflict, the Assad regime devised new pathways through which to secure crucial supplies ranging from petroleum to sugar, weapons, and wheat. The accessibility of subsidised bread stands in stark contrast with the recurring shortages, oscillating prices, and sporadic scarcities seen in opposition-held areas, especially those besieged by government forces.[68] This disparity has been one of the crucial mechanisms through which the regime has been able to slowly expand its hold on the country and quash revolutionary aspirations after briefly appearing to be on the brink of collapse in 2014. While such assistance could easily be portrayed as a straightforward expression of foreign support for the Assad regime, a form of influence that extends from one country to its proxy or ally, scrutiny of bread provision makes clear that there is more at play. Crucial here are the practices through which the regime obtains resources in order to leverage a presence in the lives of Syrians whom it seeks to rule, so that the water that irrigates farms in Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa is converted into calories to feed citizens in Tartous, Hama, and Damascus. Scale, territory or the prism of proxy war obscure more here than they reveal.

I do not mean to suggest that the political priorities and resources of the 'centre' are of no consequence, but that such priorities require associations and collaborations to be achieved.[69] And such modes of connection have repeatedly proven crucial to minimising unrest and performing authority among those in regime-held areas. In several interviews conducted over Skype in March 2018, respondents acknowledged the wide availability and low price of bread at the time, especially in comparison with opposition-held parts of the country. Others emphasised the high price of other foods when compared to *khubz al-dawla*. One resident of the al-Midan neighbourhood of Damascus explained how 'the regime has raised the subsidized price but bread is still very cheap. We could not live without this bread.'[70] Another resident from al-Shaghour expressed surprise at how the foodstuff was so consistently supplied: 'We have not lacked bread for one day since 2011. It is impressive. I do not know how the regime does it but every day there is enough at my local bakery.'[71] The 'true' political preferences of such citizens are impossible to know, yet the folding in of distant resources, the capacity to make certain supplies available in the here and now of daily life, works to enroll them in performances of political authority, closing down potential alternatives by entrenching the 'architecture of state power in their everyday life'.[72] The coherent presence the Syrian state performs at the bakery masks a far more unstable achievement: that of a central institution continually connecting and coordinating with different actors so as to establish a presence in particular settings.[73] As one baker in Baramkeh, a district not far from the University of Damascus, put it: 'The regime provides all of my flour, which I think comes from Ukraine. The deliveries are consistent. A truck arrives from the flourmill every week, deposits my quota and I bake for my customers. No one lacks for food. The state is with us every day.'[74]

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[68]Throughout the conflict, the highest prices for bread were consistently found in opposition-held areas. As late as 2017, the average price in Idlib and Dara'a province was more than 100 per cent higher than in regime-held areas. World Food Programme, 'Syria Country Office: Market Price Watch Bulletin', VAM Food Security Analysis, 43 (June 2018), available at: {https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000073852/download/} accessed 27 August 2018.

[69]State authority was never extended equally throughout Syria by the unilateral will of political elites or the administrative apparatus. For an excellent account of the ways state power in the Jazira region was variably exercised during the Mandate period, see Benjamin Thomas White, 'Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920–1939', *Past and Present*, 235:1 (2017), pp. 141–78.

[70]Skype interview, Anonymous 8, 14 March 2018.

[71]Skype interview, Anonymous 9, 16 March 2018.

[72]Estella Carpi and Andrea Glioti, 'Toward an alternative "time of the revolution"? Beyond state contestation in the struggle for a new Syrian everyday', *Middle East Critique*, 27:3 (2018), p. 241.

[73]Allen, *Topologies of Power*, p. 157; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 25; Joe Painter, 'Prosaic geographies of stateness', *Political Geography*, 25:7 (2006), pp. 752–74.

[74]Skype interview, Anonymous 6, 18 April 2016.

Finding flour and making bread in Dara'a

In the Dara'a province of southern Syria, opposition actors sought out ways to respond to a citizenry craving both liberation from the Assad regime and a more equitable set of governing practices.[75] After the regime cut off flour deliveries and a host of other services in late 2011, cross-border relationships became increasingly crucial to this endeavour.[76] Before the conflict, the Syrian government had complete control of the wheat supply chain in Dara'a. Flour was produced via a sizeable industrial mill in the provincial capital (Dara'a al-Balad), from where it was distributed to local bakeries and sold at subsidised prices. After the takeover of the capital city in spring 2015, the government ceased wheat shipments to the flourmill. To ensure the latter was not used to mill local wheat or supplies purchased elsewhere, it proceeded to bomb the facility, which remained out of use through 2018.[77] In response, rebel groups and local coordination councils – civilian governance structure that built upon activist committees established during the initial protests – sought out ways to replace the government-controlled bread supply chain.

Despite being a key crucible in the 2011 uprising, Dara'a province has diverged from other opposition-controlled parts of the country. Driven by the comparatively small size of lands under rebel control as well as a high dependence on Saudi funding and Jordanian logistical support, the province has been, until a ceasefire declared in February 2016, subject to more stable forms of rule than other 'liberated territories' (al-manāṭiq al-muḥarrara) in the North (Idlib and Aleppo), where governance has been far more fractured, inconsistent, and uneven.[78] Moreoer, Dara'a's distinctiveness is partly driven by the practices through which non-Syrian actors have reached into the province. During the first two years of the conflict, food aid was largely funnelled through UN agencies (FAO, World Food Programme [WFP]) and nascent insurgent support networks based in Amman. The delivery of supplies increased in 2014, when the UN Security Council passed two resolutions that authorised channels for the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid into Syria. While the distribution of this assistance was always conditioned by political loyalties and kinship – given the localised nature of rebel factions – the availability of food improved dramatically.[79] Crucial here were relationships that guaranteed the flow of resources into the province, which were distributed in turn by Dara'a's local councils. Despite their geographic distance from Syria's other opposition enclaves, these bodies were not isolated organs of rule. Nor was governance the isolated exertion of armed groups, as it is so often portrayed in the rebel governance literature.[80] Rather, an unstable amalgam of local coordination councils, tribal groups, revolutionary factions, NGOs, humanitarians, diplomats, development contractors, and donor governments sought to meet the embodied

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[75]One of the revolution's foremost intellectuals, Omar Aziz, consistently emphasised the need to offer a pragmatic alternative to the Assad regime by offering public services so as to permeate the citizenry's everyday lives with revolutionary activity.

[76]This is not to say that such cross-border relationships did not have a long history. Dara'a province has long been a major trading route between Jordan and Syria.

[77]Denying populations consistent access to food has been one of the primary means through which the Assad regime has sought to delegitimise opposition authorities. For more on myriad ways the Assad regime has helped manufacture the very vulnerabilities it then seeks to ameliorate, see Lisa Wedeen, 'Ideology and humor in dark times: Notes from Syria', *Critical Inquiry*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 841–73.

[78]Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria*, p. 114; Abdul Kadir Ali, 'The security gap in Syria: Individual and collective security in "rebel-held" territories', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 4:1 (2015), pp. 1–20.

[79]Marika Sosnowski, 'Violence and order: the February 2016 cease-fire and the development of Rebel Governance Institutions in southern Syria', *Civil Wars*, 20:3 (2018), pp. 309–32.

For more on the impact of UN resolution 2165 on bread prices, see Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), 'Bakeries in Syria: Assessment Report' (December 2014), available at: {https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/bakeries-syria-assessment-report-december-2014} accessed 2 December 2016.

[80]Megan A. Stewart, 'Civil war as state-making: Strategic governance in civil war', *International Organization*, 72:1 (2018), pp. 205–26.

concerns of communities in the province.[81] As violence deepened and the Assad regime's withdrawal persisted, these actors gave form and substance to opposition rule.

In 2013, USAID began working with local councils to provide flour to bakeries in Dara'a. Piloted first in Aleppo, USAID partnered with the Amman branch of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), a group affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition (the collection of opposition groups recognised by several countries as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people), to deliver flour to towns and villages deemed worthy of assistance. Designed to maintain stable bread prices, the programme required close coordination between a number of forces. First, private contractors and NGOs commissioned by USAID purchase flour from private millers in Jordan, usually made from Ukrainian or Russian wheat. Supplies are then delivered to the border, where the ACU would, through Syrian employees, deliver to local councils. In addition to the inevitable complications related to distribution inside Dar'a, flour shipments were also subject to snags and hitches in the country from which it was dispatched. In order to operate, companies had to first gain the approval of the Jordanian Foreign Ministry, which never outlined its approach to or relationship with oppositions groups in southern Syria. Without such authorisation, cross-border deliveries were not feasible. Employees of these organisations made clear that decisions made in the Jordanian bureaucracy were crucial to determining whether Dar'awis received their daily bread: 'Our deliveries depend on the Jordanian foreign ministry and intelligence agencies. Without their approval, no major deliveries can go across the border.'[82] Further complications often arose once inside Syria, where the ACU had to navigate a warren of armed opposition factions under the nominal umbrella of the Free Syrian Army.[83] Despite American efforts (2014–15) to increase collaboration through a Military Operations Center based in Amman, the so-called 'Southern Front' remained more a loose coalition than a coherent amalgam.[84] Given their role in providing security and warding off regime forces, navigating these groups was crucial to bread provision. In sum, the activities of armed factions, private contractors, host governments, and foreign donors all had a variegated effect on bread provision in Dara'a.

To improve coordination the Jordan-based branch of the Syrian Public Establishment for Grains (SPEG), an agency working under the umbrella of Ministry of Finance and Economy in the Syrian Interim Government, took control of the regional supply chain in 2015. It drew on funds from several donors (Germany, the UAE, US, UK, Kuwait) to build a logistical infrastructure that would keep bread prices stable and affordable amidst access challenges and constant bombardment. In a matter of months, the SPEG began to operate wheat silos and flourmills, as well as installing new ones. 'Our main job is to coordinate with everyone involved in the wheat supply chain and oversee its operation', stated one member of the SPEG, 'we are constantly monitoring bread demand in different towns and finding ways to obtain supplies in Jordan and send them to Dara'a.'[85] Throughout 2015, the SPEG funded the refurbishment of a silo in the town of Garz, which soon acted as a hub for much of the south, and the construction of an industrial mill near the Jordanian border at Nasib.[86] The latter quickly became the largest source of locally milled flour in the province, producing between 120–50 tonnes per week,

[81]Tribes, local councils, armed groups, and the local judicial court have vied for influence and popularity through service delivery Dara'a province. Sosnowski, 'Violence and order', pp. 309–32.

[82]Brent Eng and José Ciro Martínez, 'How feeding Syrians feeds the war', *Foreign Policy* (11 February 2016), available at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/11/syria-chemonics-assad-bread/} accessed 14 February 2016.

[83]The Southern Front was composed of nearly fifty rebel factions, most of whom were constantly renegotiating their allegiances and coalitions. Most were formed based on kinship and neighbourly ties; see Sosnowski, 'Violence and order', pp. 309–32.

[84]For more on the difficulties of conceptualising the Syrian 'opposition', see Hamdan, 'War, place, and the transnational', pp. 127–31.

[85]Skype interview, Anonymous 5, 22 February 2016.

[86]Regional Food Security Analysis Networks (RFSAN), 'Wheat-to-Bread Infrastructure in Southern Syria' (July 2017), available at: {http://rfsan.info/storage/app/uploads/public/598/81d/453/59881d453b408223707230.pdf} accessed 6 August 2016.

exceeding the output of all the other mills in Daraʿa combined. Provincial residents reported a noticeable decrease in bread prices following the SPEG's establishment.

Notwithstanding these successes, dependence on the Nasib mill was high, and imported flour was still required to meet local demand.[87] Flourmills and bakeries were continuously bombed by the Assad regime.[88] Others were forced to close due to the lack of key inputs such as fuel, water, and yeast.[89] Pricing competition from government wheat traders also proved a significant challenge, as the Assad regime sought to appropriate local production by paying higher prices to farmers in the province. Unable to collect much in the way of taxes and increasingly bereft of financial assistance, councils were frequently unable to purchase locally produced wheat. Hence the mounting dependence on the USAID programme and others like it.[90] As one local council member put it: 'If external assistance is terminated, we have no way to make up the shortfall. Even if we stockpiled local production, it would not suffice. We simply do not have enough wheat and cannot mill enough flour.'[91]

Producing bread in Darʿa was thus a topological problem. Confronting this challenge required folding in resources and expertise often at some geometric distance from the province, and keeping them in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce bread. This process was heavily dependent on a key set of intermediaries, who circulate materials, funds, and information across the Syrian border and into communities confronting state violence.[92] By 2015, this amalgam of NGOs, humanitarian agencies, Jordanian government officials, and Syrian revolutionaries both inside and outside the country, came to undergird governance in much of Syria's liberated south. 'We try to make sure funds and technical assistance from foreign donors make their way to those who need it most', affirmed one Syrian ACU employee based in Amman, 'Our job is to ensure support from outside reaches local councils inside Daraʿa. This is how we support the revolution.'[93] Development contractors may pursue very different ends, but their means are not all that different: 'The company's goal is to build the governance capacities of Syrian communities', an employee of one company told me, 'We draw on funds mainly from European governments to support the development of governance structures inside the country so as to restore some level of stability in a conflict environment. Ensuring flour gets into opposition areas is crucial to this endeavor.'[94] Whether such efforts are successful depends on an array of factors. What is clear, however, is that bread provision, and the political authority it works to enact, comes together through processes and relationships that are hardly coterminous with territory or scale, owing far more 'to the imagination of Escher than Euclid'.[95]

Inter-tribal conflicts unleashed after a ceasefire decreed in February 2016 were followed by a host of sieges imposed by the Syrian government.[96] Both worked to radically limit access to supplies from Jordan, as trading and smuggling routes were curbed or taken over by regime forces. In July 2017, a multi-agency report 'found gaps in every step of the wheat-to-bread supply

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[87]The vast majority of wheat grown in Daraʿa province is of the 'hard' variety, most of which was previously exported. When mixed with soft wheat, grown in cursory mounts in the province, it produces lower quality bread.

[88]Martínez and Eng, 'Stifling stateness', pp. 235–53.

[89]Aside from structural damage and destruction, reports have consistently found that one the main reasons for bakeries to stop functioning was a shortage of raw materials. ACU, 'Bakeries in Syria'; RFSAN, 'Wheat-to-Bread Infrastructure in Southern Syria'.

[90]For more on the centrality of aid to the stability of prices, see RFSAN, 'Wheat-to-Bread Infrastructure in Southern Syria'. A similar dependency on external flour from aid groups and Syrian traders based in Turkey exists in rebel-held Idlib.

[91]Skype interview, Anonymous 7, 29 January 2018.

[92]Ali Hamdan, 'Stretched Thin: Geographies of Syria's Opposition in Exile', Refugees and Migration Movements in the Middle East, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA (2017), available at: {https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/POMEPS_Studies_25_Refugees_Web.pdf#page=33} accessed 12 January 2018.

[93]Personal interview, Anonymous 3, 19 December 2015.

[94]Personal interview, Anonymous 4, 22 December 2015.

[95]Neep, 'State-space beyond territory', p. 483.

[96]Sosnowski, 'Violence and order', pp. 309–32.

line' in southern Syria. Local milling only met '15% of the flour needed to serve the population', and 'all 94 local councils identified the lack of flour as the biggest challenge to meeting bread need'.[97] In early June 2018, Dara'a's provincial council prohibited the sale of wheat to traders and collection agencies affiliated with the Syrian government. While the council had long sought to limit such sales, the decision marked the first concerted attempt to strictly enforce these transactions. It did so in preparation for an anticipated dearth in wheat supplies engendered by yet another decision made in Washington, DC. According to one USAID official, the agency had decided to radically scale back its flour provision programme in southern Syria some weeks earlier.[98] Citing the 'current landscape in southwest Syria' as well as 'the increasing number of stabilization actors and limited cross-border access for humanitarian partners', USAID had decided to reduce assistance by 30 per cent.[99] The writing was on the wall. Just weeks later, the Syrian government, with Russian assistance, completed military operations displacing more than 200,000 people in the province. The regime offensive drastically reduced areas under opposition control, as well as the pathways through which a diverse set of opposition actors sought to perform their authority. Distance is not easily dissolved, articulations of political authority are not effortlessly assembled. Once established, topological relations need to be practically maintained. Failing to do so fostered the end of opposition rule in Dara'a.

While I have not had the space to explore military assistance, trade patterns or biopolitical endeavours beyond bread provision, the conceptual argument I have made can account for how exercises of power and exertions of influence defy scalar and territorial mappings. Further empirical research is needed to trace the ways people, organisations, and things connect Damascus to Tehran, Idlib to Istanbul, and how actors seek to maintain these connections so as to ensure reliable supplies of food, funds, and firepower. More too is needed on the distribution of agency in the Syrian conflict – a tension that courses through this article. Although I have returned to certain human actors and organisations rather than distributing agency more widely, more research is needed on the ways non-humans relate to and shape the routine practices through which governing authorities enable or disable, entice or alienate those they seek to rule.[100] None of this means we should overlook blanket acts of violence overwhelmingly employed by the Assad regime, which remain among the most conspicuous registers of power in Syria today. Nor the fact that different opposition actors have varying goals and ways of governing, as well as different capacities to call upon financial and military resources at a geometric distance. Rather, my point is that at a time when the parsimony of scale and territory clearly no longer convinces, it seems more pertinent than ever to consider the spatial prisms through which we analyse politics. In the case of Syria, thinking topologically pushes us to eschew easy categorisations of the conflict as a proxy war to scrutinise instead the concrete practices and technologies of government that shape how military victories are won, civilians starved, and political authority performed.

Conclusion

By making the pathways of a material object the focus of inquiry, this article has sought to unravel an important set of connections between seemingly dispersed sites, as well as the labours, materials, and activities that must gather and cohere so as to produce bread and perform authority. In

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[97]RFSAN, 'Wheat-to-Bread Infrastructure in Southern Syria', p. 4.

[98]Waleed Khaled a-Noufal and Leen Sayyid, 'Opposition authorities in Daraa ban sale of wheat to government-held Syria as "severe" flour crisis looms', *Syria Direct* (6 June 2018), available at: {https://syriadirect.org/news/opposition-authorities-in-daraa-ban-sale-of-wheat-to-government-held-syria-as-%E2%80%98severe%E2%80%99-flour-crisis-looms/} accessed on 2 October 2018.

[99]Electronic communication, USAID official, 20 September 2018.

[100]For an excellent primer, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

this respect, I have sought to extend and enrich relational approaches to governance by thinking topologically so as to illuminate one of the biopolitical registers through which power is practised in contemporary Syria. I have sought to make clear that the Assad regime's ability to leverage resources to feed people on a prolonged basis is not just a question of foreign ties, domestic resources, or powerful allies, but how these are drawn on and employed, the various ways they are used to advantage so as to fold into people's daily lives. As a political scientist, the shift I advocate in our conceptions of space is driven neither by disciplinary attachments nor to promote alluring metaphors, but by its explanatory promise.[101] Syria is transected by a range of forces whose activities and practices clearly complicate the neat maps of territorial control and regional alliance so commonly used to explain the dynamics of the country's conflict. It seems patently unwise then to reify scale and territory when flows of influence, power and resources clearly do not respond to such orderings. To counter such impulses, I suggest we examine the multivalent forms of connection that topological thinking helps elucidate.[102] The result may sometimes resemble a rather messy ensemble of forces, complicating our attempts to impose uniformity and infer universal patterns from social phenomena that occur in bounded units. Yet the alternative is not only to obscure much of what has happened in Syria since the onset of peaceful protests in March 2011, but to remain ensnared in analytical frameworks that often work to reinforce the very power geometries we seek to disrupt. For our imaginative geographies are not simply depictions of reality, as Edward Said long ago cautioned; they are performative, and impact the world.

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[101]Allen, *Topologies of Power*, p. 16.

[102]For two different attempts in historical work on the Middle East to overcome prevalent spatial frameworks, albeit ones with far different theoretical touchstones, see Alan Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Environmental History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).