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Syria

Scenes from the revolution

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The confrontation has opened in Syria between, on the one hand, the popular masses that have risen up for freedom and dignity and on the other the repressive dictatorial regime which has imposed its dead weight on the country for four decades. Antagonisms around Syria have not ceased since the country became independent in 1946. It is enough to recall that Syria today, or the Syrian Arab Republic, is only what remains of the Greater Syria that the Sykes-Picot agreement shared out between Britain and France at the beginning of the last century. The intertwining of relations between Syria and its neighbours (Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine and Jordan) and Egyptian-Saudi rivalry for influence in Syria have lasted ever since. Imperialist projects and alliances have attempted to contain it, the most famous being the Eisenhower plan and the Baghdad Pact. These attempts have multiplied in the last decade, notably after the US invasion of Iraq, the emergence of the Teheran-Damascus axis and the US desire to encircle Iran under the pretext of its nuclear programme.

In reality, foreign intervention or its absence only depends on the interests of the Western states and their internal, regional and international conditions, which are not favourable today to this type of manoeuvre. As to the opinion of the Syrians, that is the last of their concerns, because they have no need of anybody's agreement to intervene and will find sufficient justifications and pretexts, even the most futile, when they want to do it. In the last resort, the positions of the Syrian regime, its attitude, situation and the state of Syria at a given point of the development of the revolution constitute the main factors – indeed the only factor – determining the conditions and pretexts for a military intervention.

The Syrian opposition

Some months after the Syrian people rose up and faced the infernal machine of repression launched by the regime against the revolution – which began to spread horizontally and vertically leading to thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of arrests – the Syrian National Council was established consisting of a number of political, religious and liberal currents, with a clear predominance of the first. The popular movement hailed this initiative and expressed its support for this Council. Not because it agreed with the terms of its constitution or with its internal structure, but because it needed, during the early months, to unite and centralise its struggle inside a structure representative of all the currents to give the movement more élan, strength and support.

However the National Council, instead of orienting its efforts to support, activate and unite the popular movement has averted its eyes from it. It threw itself into the marketing of illusions by turning to the influential international powers and seeking to draw inspiration from the Libyan experience – without taking into consideration the differences and contrasts.

From the request for an air embargo until the reiterated demand for a buffer zone, via its hesitant position with respect to the Free Syrian Army and its request for the protection of civilians and safe routes, the National Council has proved incapable of offering a tangible orientation to the revolution.

Concomitant with the formation of the National Council, another opposition grouping, the National Coordination Commission, was set up. It brings together parties and personalities opposed to the regime who have suffered

repression and persecution for more than three decades. Nonetheless at each stage of the revolution it did not reach the level attained by the masses. From its creation, the National Coordination Commission focused on military intervention “ whereas this question was not, and still is not posed “ instead of concentrating on the fall of the regime. It has seemed more concerned with confronting the National Council than with struggling against the regime. In reality, the discourse of the NCC was the expression of the category of Syrians who were frightened, hesitant and silent more than that of the street in revolt.

The Communists and the revolution

The Syrian political field was distinguished from that of other Arab countries inasmuch as there were no other Communist parties than the traditional (Stalinist) one. The latter was created in the 1920s and maintained its unity until the early 1970s. Then it began to split and fracture, to give birth by the early 2000s to four parties. Three have remained faithful to remained to Moscow and have attached themselves to the dictatorship, either by joining the ruling "Baath Party Front" or by formulating very timid critiques of the economic policies of the regime from outside. After the outbreak of the revolution, they did not understand the demand for radical change, even if some of their activists and sympathisers participate in the popular movement, without the agreement of their leaderships. The fourth party which emerged from this division has distanced itself from the regime since the mid 1970s and joined the opposition, exposing itself thus to repression and persecution during the subsequent decades. In the 2000s, it became a liberal party, called the Democratic Peoples' Party, and it is now part of the Syrian National Council.

At the end of the 1970s, a new Communist party was set up, the Communist Action Party (CAP). It included in its ranks revolutionary Stalinist currents and even a Trotskyist current. The question of the fall of the regime was posed since 1979, exposing this party to successive waves of repression, persecution and continuous arrests, which led by the early 1990s to paralysis of its political and organisational activity. The CAP was heard of again in the early 2000s, when elements of its leadership were freed from prison (some had spent more than 17 years there). It experiences splits and ideological transformations, stretching from liberalism to revolutionary engagement via Stalinism. Some of its members were able to rebuild the party and form a coalition with other organisations originating from the Communist tradition “ the Regroupment of the Marxist left “ which is today one of the components of the NCC. During the revolution and the emergence of the popular movement forms of left organisation have also appeared, but they remain limited in terms of action and influence.

The Free Syrian Army

In spite of the intensity of the repression and the murders perpetrated by the regime the popular movement remained peaceful during its initial months. If the demonstrators occasionally had recourse to arms, these were individual reactions provoked by the murderous madness of the security apparatuses, which the leaders of the movement had the possibility of controlling.

The security services managed to push the movement to arm itself so as to justify the killing of peaceful revolutionaries and to convince public opinion that they were dealing with “armed bands”. To do this they resorted to two processes: first, facilitating the access to citizens of cheap light weapons through connections between arms merchants and the security services; second, far more dangerously for the popular movement, by decapitating the civil and peaceful movement by the liquidation of its leadership, killings during demonstrations, executions in prisons, the detention of leaders.

This allowed the emergence of new leaders more inclined to armed confrontations with the security services, who

committed murders and exactions without end. The movement could have remained peaceful and civil if the components abroad had not pushed for an armed approach and there had not been increasingly significant desertions in the ranks of the army which led to the creation of the Free Army.

The units and command of the Syrian army were structured at the time of Assad senior, making any mutiny or collective insubordination difficult. Faced with the role that was assigned to them – repressing popular protests to protect the regime, exerting every savage form of repression and discrimination against the people – the elements of the Syrian army had no other choice than to revolt as individuals or in small groups, taking their arms with them where possible, which often happened.

If it remained confined to deserters (their number, according to the most optimistic estimates, not being more than a few thousand), the Free Army would not have been able to represent a danger for the regime. But the essence of the corps of the Free Army is now made up of civilians, who have joined it out of enthusiasm for the revolution, or because they were sought by the security services for having participated in demonstrations. Most of the civilian volunteers in the Free Army originate from marginalised social layers.

The size of the Free Army is now estimated at tens of thousands and it should be stress that the regime is losing confidence every day in its army and that it is forced to reinforce its units by more trustworthy elements, some of which are totally subordinate to the security apparatuses. We should specify also that the number of soldiers incarcerated in the prisons of the regime because of a presumption of sympathy for the revolution is numbered in the thousands, a majority of them officers. That gives an idea of the situation of the regimes army at the level of mobilisation and morale.

The social layers linked to the regime by economic interests are progressively peeling away from it. Some jump ship faced with the acceleration of the international blockade, other keep one foot in the camp of the regime and another in that of the revolution. Soon the regime will rest only on its most direct clients and on its instruments of repression. These are the apparatuses that by their structure resemble militias more than regular military units. These apparatuses could be a problem for the revolution, if the regime takes the Samson option.

There remains the danger constituted by the Free Army. Its effectiveness in the revolution for the moment remains limited. But if it comes to be supported and armed by an external power it would play an effective role in the fall of the regime.

The regime passes from attack to defence

The military campaign unleashed in recent days in the towns and villages seems to be an offensive aimed at stifling the revolution. However, in reality the regime, every day seeing the fire of the revolution spread to new towns and regions (Damascus, Aleppo), wishes to defend the status quo on the ground by asphyxiating the revolution in the regions where it first broke out (Homs, Deraa, Hama), trying to intimidate the regions newly rallied to the revolution and to boost the morale of its partisans, whose confidence in the possibility of the maintenance of the regime has been shaken. It is also about having cards in the hand during the negotiations with its allies (in particular Russia). The words of President Assad, during his meeting with the Chinese vice minister of foreign affairs on February 19, 2012, on the civil war and partition threatening Syria, are only the first signs of it.

Today we can see that the Syrian revolution has crossed the Rubicon and that there is no going backwards. The regime which governed Syria for more than four decades is coming to an end. When and how? It is difficult to respond precisely, as regimes of the same nature as this one or which resemble it have astonished observers as to

the terms of their fall (the Shah's Iran, Eastern Europe).

Another danger for the revolution and its future would be for Syria to be transformed into a zone of struggles of influence and interests between the great powers. In my view, the circumstances do not lend themselves to this, at least for Russia, in spite of the fact that US policy keenly wishes to perpetuate the conflict, not to destroy the regime but to destroy Syria, in the interests of Israel in particular. It is this which the Syrian opposition should understand and prevent, because the fall of the regime should be brought about by the forces of the Syrian people. This is the shortest road – however long it is – and the least costly, even if the price of the situation of Syria is rising in the bazaar of the international forces.

* Monif Mulhem is a Syrian revolutionary Marxist who spent more than fifteen years in prison under the dictatorship of the Assad family following his arrest in August 1981. He had been a member of the Communist Action Party.