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Syria:

Imperialism, sectarianism and Syria's revolution

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How would you characterise the current balance of forces in Syria?

The military balance of forces is clearly on the side of the regime. It has been continuously provided [arms] by its allies (Iran and Russia), high inflows of money and in the case of Hezbollah has participated directly on the field, while training some new soldiers.

On the other side, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) completely lacks any real material and financial support. The Islamist reactionary forces such as Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are being well-funded by some Gulf countries.

They fund the Islamist reactionary forces to transform the Syrian revolution into a sectarian war. The victory of the revolution in Syria and its spread to the region would be a threat to their own regimes.

We must not forget also that the tensions between FSA groups and Islamist forces of Jabhat al Nusra and ISIL have expanded recently. The latter are accused of murdering members of the FSA, including Fadi al-Qash, the head of a FSA battalion and his two brothers.

The ISIL also expelled FSA forces from several regions the FSA liberated and declared their will to establish Islamic emirates, while refusing to fight on the front lines in Aleppo, Homs and Khan al Asal.

Despite the clear advantage of the regime militarily and their destruction, the determination of the Syrian popular movement has not diminished. There are continuous demonstrations and other forms of resistance in many regions throughout Syria.

How is it that in the face of such unequal military force, the Syrian people continue?

There is no coming back to the era of Assad regime and no alternative to the continuation of the revolution. One of the main slogans in Syria chanted by the protesters is "Rather death than humiliation". In addition the Syrian popular movement knows very well that if they stop they will face terrible repression from the regime.

Can you explain some of the economic and social factors underpinning the uprising?

The regime's bourgeois credentials started in 1970 when Hafez al-Assad put an end to some radical policies of the 1960s of the left wing of his Baath Party. They were accelerated with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies when [his son] Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000. These policies especially benefited a small oligarchy.

Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, represented the mafia-style process of privatisation led by the regime. A process of privatisation created new monopolies in the hands of relatives of Bashar al-Assad, while the

quality of goods and services declined. These neoliberal economic reforms allowed the appropriation of economic power by rich and powerful.

At the same time the financial sector has developed with private banks, insurance firms, the Damascus stock exchange and money exchange bureaus. Neoliberal policies have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, especially from the Arab Gulf, at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians, who have been hit by inflation and the rising cost of living.

These policies, accelerated by the savage repression of any popular or working class protest since the early 2000s, have had devastating effects. Capital's share of Gross Domestic Product rose to 72 per cent in 2005, over a third of the population fell below the poverty line (less than US \$1 a day) and nearly half live around this threshold (\$2 or less a day). Before the revolution there was between 20-25 per cent unemployment, reaching 55 per cent for under-25s (in a country where people under 30 are 65 per cent of the total population). The percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from 11 per cent in 2000 to 33 per cent in 2010. That is, about seven million Syrians live around or below the poverty line.

The uprisings in Idlib and Deraa ... and including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, [these areas] are historic bastions of the Baath Party that had not taken part on a massive scale in the insurrection of the 1980s. This shows the involvement of the victims of neoliberalism in this revolution.

What role do the Local Coordinating Committees play in the opposition controlled areas and what kind of support do they have?

The LCC is only one actor in larger popular movement, concentrating its work especially on the provision of information, videos of demonstrations, but also working at a ground level with local popular councils, while providing services to local population and internal refugees.

We have to understand more generally the crucial role played by the popular committees and organisations in the continuation of the revolutionary process, they are the ultimate actors that allow the popular movement to resist. This is not to undermine the role played by the armed resistance, but even they are dependent on the popular movement to continue the battle, otherwise without it we would not stand a chance.

What is your response to some on the left who assert that the Syrian opposition are proxies for Western imperialism and the oil rich Gulf states?

The problem with some of the Western left, especially the Stalinists, is that they have been analysing the Syrian revolutionary process from a geo-political perspective, ignoring completely the socio-economic and political dynamism on the ground in Syria. Many of them also consider Iran, Russia, or Syria to be anti-imperialist states struggling against the USA, which is wrong on every aspect. Our choice should not be to choose between on one side the USA and Saudi Arabia and on the other side Iran and Russia, our choice is revolutionary masses struggling for their emancipation.

As Pierre Frank, French Trotskyist, wrote : "Let us note that the greatest theoreticians of Marxism did not at all define the political nature of a bourgeois regime by the positions which the latter held in the field of foreign policy but solely and simply by the position it occupied in relation to the classes composing the nation"

In addition, both sides have been trying to impose a solution from above that would maintain the regime with a

Yemeni solution (change the head of the regime, while maintaining its structure). The only difference between the positions of the Western governments and the Gulf monarchies on one side and Iran, Russia, and China's positions on the other, remains the same: what fate for the dictator Bashar al-Assad? Russia wants to maintain the dictator, while Western powers want a new leader, even more open to their interests than Bashar al-Assad.

There have been reports of armed Islamist groups attacking other groups in the opposition. What impact has this had on the opposition and how have the revolutionary forces responded?

The Syrian revolutionary masses have increasingly opposed the authoritarian and reactionary policies of these groups. In the city of Raqqa, which has been liberated from the forces of the regime since March 2013, many popular demonstrations occurred against the authoritarian actions of Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS in the city. Similar demonstrations took place with masses challenging this kind of behavior in Aleppo and other cities.

It should be said as well that Jabhat al Nusra has not hesitated to strike deals with the Assad regime, for example the regime is paying more than \$150 million Syrian lire [AU \$2.4 million] monthly to them to guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major pipelines in Baniyas and Latakia. Jabhat al Nusra fighters have also been involved in other businesses.

The Syrian National Council, instead of defending the principles of the revolution and doing everything possible to develop the democratic components of the FSA, have let these groups, which are and were part of the counter-revolution since their establishment, to develop without condemning them and actually providing them with cover. These groups, just like the Syrian regime want to divide the Syrian people into sectarian and ethnic entities. The Syrian revolution wants to break the sectarian and ethnic division.

What has been the response to the recent attacks by Islamist groups on Kurdish areas?

We have seen support from various popular committees in Syria for the Kurdish masses against the actions of the Islamist groups. Sections of the FSA are divided. Some are fighting alongside Islamists, but others joined the Kurdish militias and denounced abuses committed by Islamist groups.

The traditional opposition, from Islamists to nationalists and liberals, is in favour of Kurdish cultural rights, but not autonomy. The Current of the Revolutionary Left in Syria has reaffirmed its commitment and support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria. Support for self-determination of the Kurdish people does not prevent us from wishing to see the Kurdish people to be a full partner in the struggle against the criminal regime of Assad, and in the building of a future democratic, socialist and secular Syria.

We also condemned the behaviour of Islamists and other reactionary forces and their attempts to divide the Syrian people. Similarly, the refusal of some in the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian National Council (SNC), to recognise the rights of the Kurdish people in Syria are unacceptable and are no different of the nationalist policies of the Assad regime.

What distinct left wing organisations and forces exist inside the Syrian revolutionary movement?

Different leftist forces have been involved in the Syrian revolutionary process since the revolutionary process began. We can find numerous smaller leftist groups and youth in Syria participating in the revolutionary process, in popular committees on the ground, organisation of demonstrations and of the provision of services to the population. The left has mostly been engaged in the civil work, in opposition to the armed work.

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From the very beginning, despite our modest capacities, we, the Current of the Revolutionary Left has not once faltered in our engagement with the revolution, calling for democracy and socialism. We have struggled alongside the people and all democratic forces for the victory of this great popular revolution, just as we struggle for the formation of a socialist workers' party.

23 August, 2013

Read the Current of the Revolutionary Left's [statement on Assad's chemical weapons massacre](#):

Interview first published in [Solidarity magazine](#).