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Syria

Peace in Syria: without Assad

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LeftEast editor Ilya Budraitskis conducted this interview with Swiss/Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher, first published in Russian on Open Left on October 17.

The attempt at an agreement between Russia and the USA failed dramatically. What were the reasons? Is there any chance that this type of peace talks on the level of “great powers” can bring real peace to Syria? Do you think that any sustainable ceasefire or even peace process is possible with the participation of Assad?

First, the ceasefire was poorly respected on the ground even when implemented, especially by the Assad regime and its allies, but the main reason why it failed was that this ceasefire did not address the political roots of the problem in Syria: the Assad regime. The agreement provided for greater military coordination between Russia and the United States in the “war on terror” in Syria, targeting the jihadist groups of the Islamic State and Fateh al-Sham (the former Jabhat al-Nusra), by the establishment of a Joint Implementation Center. The agreement did not denounce the interventions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah and other various Shi’a fundamentalist militias alongside the Assad regime, while it did not mention any political transition to a democratic system and the departure of the dictator Assad and his criminal clique. This political agreement concretely led to the stabilization of the Assad regime under the pretext of the so-called “war on terror” for the political interest of the USA and Russia. That is why this agreement was rejected by large sections of the democratic opposition, whether armed or peaceful.

Any political transition to put an end to the war and move towards a democratic system must include the departure of the dictator Assad and his clique in power. Otherwise the war will continue and provoke more catastrophes in terms of human lives. In this transition, all war criminals must be held accountable for their crimes, including and foremost Bashar al-Assad and his clique.

This is why the peace talks on the level of great powers can hardly bring peace if the source of the problem is not tackled. I will only add that despite some oppositions and contradictions with the Russian State, and contrary to the beliefs of many, the consistent policy of the US and Western states has not been to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, but to maintain with it with only superficial changes. This they have done while preventing any serious armed assistance to democratic groups of the Free Syrian Army. Among all powers, there is a near consensus around certain points: to liquidate the revolutionary popular movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus and keep at its head the dictator Bashar Al-Assad for the short-to-medium term. Also their objective is to oppose Kurdish autonomy and try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as Daesh.

Do you think Assad was interested in this failure? What is the position of his regime at the moment? How much popular support does it enjoy, and to what extent is it dependent on Iran and Russia?

Bashar al-Assad and his associates in power aim to recover the whole of Syria and do not accept any form of opposition, especially not a democratic one. In September, following the ceasefire concluded between Russia and USA, Bashar al-Assad said the Syrian regime was still “determined to recover every area from the terrorists, and to rebuild”.

Assad’s regime is not popular, quite the contrary – even among the majority of those who oppose the revolution – because of its corruption, insecurity, bad economic situation and high inflation, the way he instrumentalized sectarianism, the multiplication and thuggish behavior of pro-Assad militias, etc... but the problem is that it is seen as the lesser evil by many, especially large sections of the minorities and the Sunni middle and upper

class strata in the cities, by comparison to the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements, which as a reminder was part of the Assad regime's objective as it repressed democrat and progressive individuals and groups, while liberating from prisons salafists and jihadists and letting Islamic fundamentalist movements develop. In addition to this, the ability of the Syrian state, under Assad, to remain the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside the regime's control, has also been a key factor in its resilience. The state indeed still played its role as a supplier of subsidised goods and services such as bread, education, health, electricity, and water, as the country's main employer – civil servants were estimated at more than 50 percent of the total working population, and a higher percentage of wage earners – and guarantor of law and order. The provision of state services, in contrast to the perceived chaos in other areas, especially those controlled by the opposition, was among the most powerful sources of regime legitimacy.

The assistance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah has been absolutely indispensable for regime survival at all levels: political, economic and military. The military battle of Aleppo would for example not be possible today without the assistance of Russian airplanes and Iranian-sponsored ground forces and Hezbollah. The Syrian army has indeed been weakened considerably since the beginning of the uprising, with various estimations indicating that its numbers fell from 300,000 to as few as 80,000. The weakness of the regime's army has led to the creations of militias throughout the country. These paramilitary forces can be broadly divided into two groups: those militias strongly connected to the regime's security apparatus and the Republican Guard through General Bassam al-Hassan, the Republican Guard officer who established the National Defence Forces (NDF) and those personally linked to the Assad family and private businesses. This is in addition to foreign militias, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and mostly Iranian-sponsored sectarian Shi'a ones from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The security and intelligence services of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have been advising and assisting the Syrian regime since the beginning of the uprising. These efforts have evolved into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Ground Forces, the Quds Force, intelligence services, and law enforcement forces. The IRI has been providing essential military supplies to Assad and has also been assisting pro-regime militias.

In addition to its military assistance, the IRI has also provided 3 important loans to the Assad regime, of \$1 billion in January 2013, of \$3.6 billion in August 2013 and \$1 billion in June 2015 respectively. Trade between the two countries also grew from approximately about \$300 million in 2010 to \$1 billion in 2014.

For its part, Russia has long supplied Assad's armed forces with the vast majority of their weaponry. The Russian state has continued to ship substantial volumes of small arms, ammunition, spare parts and refurbished material to pro-regime forces. In January 2014, Russia stepped up supplies of military gear to the Syrian regime, including armoured vehicles, drones and guided bombs. In the end of the summer of 2015, Russia greatly expanded its military involvement on the side of the Assad regime, including providing serious training and logistical support to the Syrian army. Another level of Russia's military involvement was reached on September 30, 2015, when Russian jets conducted their first raids in Syria. Since then, the regime has been able to stop military advances from various oppositional armed forces and recover territories.

How would you characterize the opposition for the moment? What is the role of Al-Nusra and its relation with other anti-Assad groups? To what extent does the Sunni population support these forces?

From the beginning of the revolution, the regime specifically targeted activists and groups with democratic and secular positions opposing sectarianism and racism. They targeted those who had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience and strike action. They came from across the various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Because of these factors and their capabilities as organizers, they undermined the propaganda of the regime that denounced the revolution as a conspiracy of armed extremist Islamist fundamentalist groups.

The resulting militarization of the uprising and increasing power of fundamentalist Islamists further repressed democratic forces and the objectives of the revolution.

Nevertheless, though weakened, they still exist. Local Coordination Committees and popular organizations opposing the regime and Islamic fundamentalist movements still are active in various regions. In the areas liberated from the regime, activists and local populations have developed forms of self-organization and free and independent media, and campaign on various subjects such as raising awareness, providing education, democratic aspirations and so on. Local councils, elected or established on consensus, also still exist in some regions, providing municipal services to the local population.

It is not for no reason that the free areas of Aleppo and Douma in Damascus province both run by local councils have been the target of the regime's and Russia's bombing, as they represent democratic alternatives in Syria, free from the regime and fundamentalist Islamists.

The presence of these popular forces was witnessed in February when massive demonstrations occurred throughout the liberated areas of Syria with democratic and non-sectarian slogans following partial ceasefires and a respite from airstrikes. Jihadist military forces and their symbols were absent from these popular demonstrations. At the same time, we should not conceal the problems existing in areas, such as the lack or absence of women's participation and involvement, the absence of religious minorities and the negative influences of some foreign countries and of some extremist Islamist groups.

While the opposition is today less diverse than at the beginning of the revolution, and more predominantly Arab Sunni, we must also remember that 70 per cent of the country's population is comprised of Sunni Arabs. Other denominations are still involved in the revolution as was witnessed with recent protests in the Druze province of Sweida with demonstrators singing slogans demanding the fall of the regime, that "the Syrian people are one" and that Syria belongs to the people and not to the Assad family. Opposition also exists in Kurdish-majority regions and others such as Salamiyah which is majority Ismaeli and so on.

Lastly, Jabhat al-Nusra has regained some popularity, especially following its participation in the breaking of the siege of the liberated areas of Aleppo in the beginning of August, although people are still very cautious towards it because of its reactionary and authoritarian practices. In some areas, popular resistance against it still exists, especially in the Idlib region, where Jabhat al-Nusra is very influential. The town of Maaret al-Numaan has continued its popular protests, which have been ongoing for more than 100 days, against Jabhat al-Nusra. This said, armed opposition groups and some sections of the population welcome its help, though not its ideology, when faced on their own against regime forces and its allies. People feel abandoned by the world, and therefore seek help from everyone to defend themselves, which is understandable in situations such as the siege and continual bombing that face the liberated areas of Aleppo.

It is important to understand that it is not enough to put a military end to the capacities for violence of Jabhat al-Nusra and similar groups, only to see their reappearance in the future; rather, we must address the socio-economic and political conditions that enable and enabled its development. Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra feed on authoritarian regimes and their murderous repressions, their neo-liberal and sectarian policies, as well as the support they get from imperialist and sub-imperialist countries. What is necessary is to get rid of the conditions that allow fundamentalist groups to develop and expand, and this means empowering the people on the ground to overthrow the authoritarian regime and face reactionary groups.

What are the relations between the Assad regime and Kurdish forces? Do you think that they could build any kind of long-term alliance?

The relations between the Assad regime and the PYD forces (a sister organisation of the PKK) are stable without being good; tensions persist between the two actors. A kind of tacit non-aggression pact existed between PYD and Assad regime forces for a long period. There is however no strategic alliance or even strategic collaboration between the Assad regime and the PYD: many examples attest to this. The Assad regime repeatedly declared that it refuses any kind of autonomy for the Kurds. In addition this pact of non-aggression has been challenged by several events. In August, regime airplanes bombed the Kurdish neighborhoods of the city of Hassaka. The US-led coalition scrambled fighters to protect US advisers working with Kurdish forces after Syrian regime jets bombed the area. The coalition scrambled its own jets to the area in a bid to intercept the Syrian jets, but the regime planes had left by the time they arrived. This allowed the YPG forces to take near complete control of Hasaka after a ceasefire, which included the withdrawal of the Syrian army and allied militia from the city, ended a week of fighting with the regime forces, consolidating the Kurds' grip on Syria's northeast as Turkey increased its efforts to check their influence.

Turkey's military intervention all along its border with Syria is designed above all to counter the PYD. This intervention, which targets the Islamic State also, but above all the Kurdish PYD forces, has been occurring with the tacit green light of the Assad regime, Iran and Russia. They all called, however, for the Turkish government to collaborate with Damascus. Since the failed military coup d'état in Turkey, the AKP government has come closer again to the Russian government, while diminishing its opposition to the Assad regime, notably by saying it would accept Assad in a transitional phase, and Erdoğan has kept silent on the bombing and offensive against liberated Aleppo.

How you could characterize the humanitarian situation in Aleppo and in Syria in general?

The Humanitarian situation is catastrophic in general. In the besieged opposition-held areas of Aleppo, in which 250,000 people are still living, Russian and regime bombing continue with great violence, while residents are lacking everything. Most of the hospitals have been destroyed or are unable to work because of the shelling. Water supplies, residential neighbourhoods and rescuers' equipment have fallen victim to the bombings.

In Syria, the war has claimed more than 450,000 deaths. In all, 11.5 percent of Syria's population has been wounded or killed since 2011, while more than 85 percent of the country is living in poverty, with close to 7 in 10 Syrians stuck in extreme poverty – unable to afford essentials like food or water. More than half of the population of Syria is displaced, around 6.8 million internally displaced within Syria and the rest outside the country. In September 2016, UNHCR and different partners were addressing the concerns of 4,794,473 refugees registered in neighboring countries, of which women and children make up three-quarters of the refugee population. The regime of Assad and its allies are the main responsible for the situation.

The end of the war is an absolute humanitarian and political necessity. The end of the war must lead to the end of the suffering of millions of people within and outside Syria and give them the possibility to come back to their homes. The end of the war is also a political objective because it is the only way for democratic and progressive forces to re-organise and play once again a leading role in the struggle for a new Syria for all without discrimination, far from the dictatorship of the criminal Assad regime and the authoritarian and reactionary practices of Islamist fundamentalist forces.

The basis for any future democratic Syria must include the democratic and social empowerment of the underprivileged classes to manage their own societies and to be able to self-organise – free from gender, ethnic and religious discriminations.

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