

Table of content:

<i>On the Realization of Fantasy... The Day Assad Fell. A Testimony from Damascus</i> by Omar Dayyoub (17.12.24).....	p. 3
<i>„The future of Syria will be decided by the Syrians and nobody else“</i> Interview with Leila Al-Shami (16.12.24).....	p. 4
<i>From Syria to Palestine, liberation comes from below</i> by Joseph Daher (11.12.24).....	p. 4
<i>Free Syria's first days: The good, the bad, an the ugly</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab. (10.12.24).....	p.6
<i>Bashar al-Assad's terror state is gone: Syria can breathe again</i> by Karim Safieddine. (10.12.24).....	p.7
<i>Understanding the rebellion in Syria</i> Interview with Joseph Daher (9.12.24).....	p. 7
<i>Left analyses of imperialism must stand against 'campism'</i> by Elia J Ayoub (25.8.24).....	p. 12
<i>Give Us Our Land Back. The Golan Heights, Greenwashing, Syria and Palestine's Intertwined Revolutions</i> by Banah Ghadbian (6.8.24).....	p. 13
<i>Genocide justifying itself by genocide</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab (5.5.24).....	p. 16
<i>Palestinian Assadists</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab (5.3.23).....	p. 17
<i>Revolution Reborn</i> by Leila Al Shami (26.8.23).....	p. 17
<i>Building alternative futures in the present: the case of Syria's communes</i> by Leila Al Shami (18.3.21).....	p. 18
<i>The US protests: Lessons from Syria</i> by Leila Al Shami (6.6.20).....	p. 19
<i>Idlib resists</i> by Leila Al Shami (9.11.19).....	p. 21
<i>The Syrian Quagmire</i> by Leila Al Shami (11.3.19).....	p. 21
<i>The 'anti-imperialism' of idiots</i> by Leila Al Shami (14.4.18).....	p. 22
<i>The act of forgiving (and forgetting)</i> by Leila Al Shami (4.8.17).....	p. 24
<i>Fighting on all fronts: Women's resistance in Syria</i> by Leila Al Shami (29.12.16).....	p. 27
<i>Militarization and Liberation</i> by Leila Al Shami, Robin Yassin-Kassab(2016).....	p. 24
<i>On Islamisation</i> by Leila Al Shami, Robin Yassin-Kassab (2016).....	p. 25
<i>Fighting on all fronts: Women's resistance in Syria</i> by Leila Al Shami (29.12.16).....	p.27
<i>Anarchism</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab (31.10.16).....	p. 28
<i>London Anarchist Bookfair</i> by Leila Al-Shami (29.10.16).....	p. 29
<i>Challenging the Nation State in Syria</i> by Leila Al Shami (12.5.16).....	p. 29
<i>'Democratic Confederalism' or Counter-Revolution?</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab (22.2.16).....	p. 31
<i>'Iran the Protector'</i> by Robin Yassin-Kassab (16.2.16).....	p. 32
<i>The struggle for Kobane: an example of selective solidarity</i> by Leila Al Shami (20.10.14).....	p. 33
<i>Mutual struggle, mutual solidarity</i> by Leila Al Shami (29.7.14).....	p. 34
<i>Interview with Apatris on the Syrian revolution</i> by Leila Al Shami (28.11.13).....	p. 35

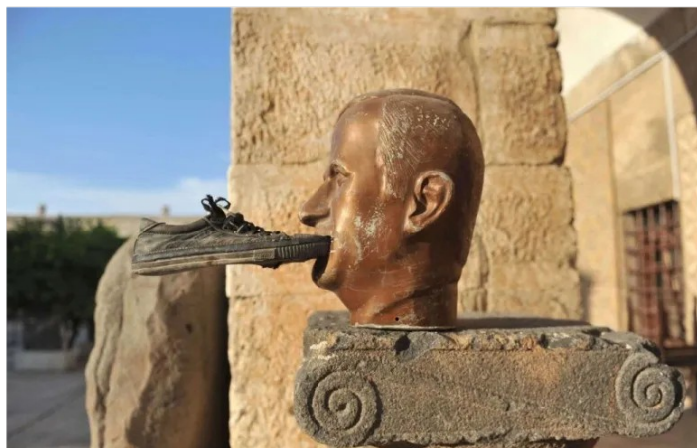
„the
regime has
fallen! “



Compilation of texts on the latest events in Syria, as well as on the history of the syrian revolution, its (missing) solidarity, the war and the counter-revolution...

Further Reading:

- „Revolutionary echoes from Syria. Conversations with anarchists from Aleppo“ by Hourriya [https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anonymous-hourriya-revolutionary-echoes-from-syria]
- „The Most Important Thing“ by The Hamilton Institute. [https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-most-important-thing]
- „Burning Country“ by Robin Yassin-Kassab & Leila al-Shami. [https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robin-yassin-kassab-and-leila-al-shami-burning-country]
- „The Crossing“ by Samar Yazbek.
- „Assad or We Burn The Country“ by Sam Dagher.
- „The Impossible Revolution“ by Yassin al-Haj Saleh.
- „No Turning Back“ by Rania Abouzeid.
- „We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled“ by Wendy Pearlman.



On the Realization of Fantasy... The Day Assad Fell

A Testimony from Damascus. By Omar Dayyoub (17.12.24)

In President's Square in Jaramana, the head of Hafez al-Assad's statue had been toppled and cast aside to the right of the square. Young people climbed onto several pictures of Bashar al-Assad, tearing them apart with their hands and feet. In this emotional article, Ammar Dayoub takes us on a journey through the town of Jaramana and the city of Damascus, vividly describing how he experienced the historic moments of Assad's fall.

It was a fantasy that gradually began to materialize. With the liberation of Aleppo and Hama and the onset of battles in Homs, I thought Damascus would not fall easily. I believed international powers would intervene to impose a political transition, aiming to prevent chaos from spilling beyond Syria's borders. It never occurred to me that the battles and territorial gains would accelerate at a rocket-like pace, reaching Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida. On the evening of Saturday 7 December, just three days after the entry into Aleppo, breaking news began flooding in: towns adjacent to Damascus were starting to be liberated. I found myself glued to my mobile phone, forgetting to eat and staying up late—me, someone who is so disciplined about waking, sleeping, and eating at set times. As the hours passed, they advanced into Daraya, adjacent to the Mezzeh airport and military units that had bombarded and sniped at Daraya for years. Then, they entered Moadamiyeh, and demonstrations erupted in Eastern Ghouta.

On Saturday evening, agitated youths tore down the statue of Hafez al-Assad in President's Square in Jaramana, the town where I live. Around 4:30 p.m., as soon as I heard the news, I quickly got dressed and asked my neighbor if I could leave my little puppy, Mishmish, with him. He said he would come with me too. I dashed down the stairs at full speed and waited at the corner of the street for over five minutes, feeling time slip away. Impatient, I called him urgently, and he finally came down. My strides were long, and he had to run to keep up with me. When we reached the square, a large crowd of youths had gathered. Hafez al-Assad's head lay toppled, thrown to the right side of the square. The youths had climbed onto several pictures of Bashar al-Assad, ripping them apart with their hands and feet. Their chants echoed in the air: *"Syria belongs to us, not to the Assad family!"*

I felt a mixture of overwhelming happiness, tinged with fear and tension. Jaramana is not my hometown, and I didn't see any friends or acquaintances, so I chose not to join the movement, instead observing the unfolding events with caution. Hundreds of people stood along the sidewalks, their faces reflecting a blend of joy, fear, and anticipation as they witnessed an unprecedented moment in the town.

As time went on, it became clear that the fear of the regime and its oppressive machinery was beginning to dissipate among the people. Information spread, confirming the withdrawal of security detachments and police forces. This fueled a sense of liberation, as people celebrated their freedom from captivity.

The rapid flow of news about the withdrawal from the southern cities and Quneitra was enough to confirm that I was witnessing a scenario beyond imagination, surpassing even my wildest expectations: Assad was on his way to leave Syria for the last time, perhaps heading to another country.

Since 2011, I have been living in a constant state of fear. I hadn't left the country, and I was deeply worried about the possibility of foreign intervention, the defeat of the factions before reaching Hama, and losing the opportunity for change in Syria. Without change, I feared the multiplication of crises: division, sectarian conflict, poverty, and more.

What I feared most began to materialize in 2013, with the widespread militarization, followed by America and its international coalition's intervention to fight terrorism in 2014. Then, in 2015, Russia entered the war to help the regime reclaim towns, working in coordination with Turkey and Iran. The entry of troops into the vicinity of Damascus signaled that the regime's collapse was inevitable. Yet, the delay in its fall since 2013 had left me hesitant to fully embrace this belief. I feared the regime might once again find a way to survive,

with regional or international backing. Perhaps it could secure new alliances, trade critical intelligence about jihadist organizations, or benefit from some unexpected event that would delay its collapse once more.

Despite my intense fear, I wrote articles for newspapers without making any concessions to the regime. I believed that its departure was the key to opening the door for profound change in Syria. However, I carefully crafted my texts with phrases that would avoid provoking the security services, hoping to minimize the risk of being arrested and dying for nothing. I would routinely delete messages exchanged with friends on social media or WhatsApp, and I urged others to do the same, fearing that my mobile phone might fall into the hands of the security apparatus.

When I posted content containing radical criticism or direct language, many friends, both inside and outside the country, would urge me to delete it. They believed it was better to wait rather than risk being arrested. These warnings would terrify me temporarily, but I always returned to writing. This was the life I led from 2011 until the moment the regime finally fell, at dawn on Saturday 8 December 2024.

An hour after the fall, I received a phone call from my friend, telling me I had only a few minutes to come down so we could go together to Umayyad Square. Half asleep, I don't even remember how I got dressed. I tried to call my neighbor to leave Mishmish with him, but he was already awake—no one in Syria was asleep.

I had gone to bed around three, only to wake up around six. The darkness of the night still lingered. I left Mishmish and rushed down the stairs, practically leaping. In front of my house, I met my friend, and we ran toward the cars. I shouted, *"We are done, guys, freedom for Syria!"*

We piled into the cars, which were packed so tightly that we could barely find a spot for ourselves. As we drove, we listened to Sarout's songs and other revolutionary anthems from 2011 and 2012, while discussing the long-awaited fall of the regime, cursing the president and his father for what they had done to the country—handing it over to foreign powers, bringing occupations, all to hold onto power forever.

There were three cars in total: two from Sweida and one from Damascus. Among us were young men wanted by the regime since 2011, who hadn't set foot in Damascus since, despite living no more than 100 kilometers away. I, too, had not visited my city, Homs, since 2012, and had not seen my nephews, now aged eleven, nine, and four.

The cars kept pouring in, one after the other, from Jaramana, then Bab Touma, then Baghdad Street, and other areas, until we finally reached Umayyad Square. We were among the first to arrive. The sun was just beginning to rise. The joy, laughter, photos, and celebratory gunfire grew louder. Groups of people were steadily increasing, but not in large numbers. The square wasn't full, and there was no public speech. As more cars carrying fighters from Sweida, Daraa, and Western Ghouta arrived, they fired even more bullets into the air, celebrating the fall of the tyrant and his family's rule.

We circled the square, taking photos, broadcasting live, sending victory signs, and singing, *"Syria is ours, not for the Assad family," "Long live Syria, down with Assad."* I corrected someone, saying, *"Long live Syria, Assad is down."*

While we were at the peak of joy, one of the young men told us that Israel had advanced in Quneitra and occupied Mount Hermon. It was a sad blow, almost killing the joy inside me. But I thought that the fall of the tyrant would help reclaim the land, and the most important thing now was to end this nightmare.

It soon became clear that we were facing significant problems. The signs appeared immediately, as we began to notice thefts from the military buildings surrounding the square, from the Opera House, and reports of Israel occupying new areas. When we decided to leave around ten in the morning, we discovered that someone had stolen many items and around two million Syrian pounds from a friend's car. It was deeply disturbing.

We were then told that the detainees would be released at Abbasid Square, so we went there immediately, hoping to witness this historic moment. After waiting for about half an hour, we received the news that the detainees had been released randomly from the security branches and Sednaya prison, but we didn't see any of them. We then got into the cars and headed back to Jaramana, on a day filled with pure happiness.

My friend, Rania Mustafa, the leftist political writer, who had been in Damascus since 2012, would have made it a million times harder for me to stay if she hadn't been there. Even though several days had passed, she still looked at me with anger. How could I not have told her to go with me to Umayyad Square, a place Syrians had longed to reach since 2011, where hundreds of martyrs had fallen trying to make it possible? I feel like I "betrayed" her, even though it was merely a coincidence and a result of my haste, as these were my last moments under the family's rule.

<https://syriauntold.com/2024/12/17/on-the-realization-of-fantasy-the-day-assad-fell/>

„The future of Syria will be decided by the Syrians and nobody else“

Interview with Leila Al-Shami (16.12.24)

„We are still in the early days of the regime's collapse, but Syrians are already organising themselves“

When we interviewed you in 2019, you said that the Syrian people were facing several forms of fascism, that of the regime of course, but also that of certain Islamist rebel groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTC). Do you think that HTC has changed since then, at least strategically?

HTC has changed quite dramatically over the years. It has moved away from its roots in al-Qaeda, which was a transnational jihadist organisation, and transformed itself into a Syrian nationalist Islamist project. Joulani seems to be a pragmatist. He has a lot of experience in building institutions of governance, as he has ruled Idlib since 2017 through the Syrian Salvation Government. The Idlib government was made up of civilian technocrats appointed by the shura council, rather than democratically elected, and included no women in leadership positions. They were responsible for providing services, distributing humanitarian aid in coordination with international organisations and ensuring security. They did this under very difficult conditions, and Idlib and its economy were more stable than elsewhere in Syria, so they enjoyed some popular support. But they remained an autocratic and authoritarian force. While people had more freedoms in Idlib than in the regime-controlled areas, over the years we have seen continuous protests in Idlib against the HTS regime, due to the silencing of opponents, the imprisonment of critics and reports of abuses in prisons.

Since the overthrow of Assad, Jolani has clearly been trying to build popular and international legitimacy. He has reached out to minority communities (both religious minorities and Kurds) to reassure them of their future in the country. He has issued decrees banning any interference with women's dress. Many Syrians feel reassured by these measures, but many are also cautious. We must not forget that this is a transitional government. The question now is to what extent other players, including progressive and democratic forces, will be involved in Syria's future. And to what extent will another popular movement emerge from below to hold the leaders to account and continue to make progress towards the original objectives of the revolution?

How do you explain the sudden fall of the Assad regime? Some see it as the victory of an armed and organised militia supported by Turkey and having taken advantage of the weakening of Hezbollah. Others see it as the continuation and reactivation of the revolutionary process and stress the importance of local and popular uprisings in this victory. Are we witnessing a change of regime or a decisive stage in a longer revolutionary process?

I see it as both. The fall of the regime was a decisive event. It marks the end of a horrible era of brutality in Syria's history. It also offers a tremendous opportunity to re-launch civil activism and may lead to the continuation of the revolutionary process. Today, Syrians are flocking from all over the world to return to Syria. Many of these revolutionaries have never given up on their dreams and have also learned a great deal from their experience of organising in exile and their contact with different political cultures. Already, many initiatives

are taking shape, and there are now opportunities and hope, which Syrians have not had for many years, despite the many challenges we still have to overcome.

A few years ago, you wrote an important text, „The anti-imperialism of idiots“, in which you denounced the failure of a certain Left that stubbornly refused to understand anything about the Syrian revolution by trying to translate it into its own dusty, out-of-touch categories. Nevertheless, the geopolitical maelstrom in which Syria finds itself today raises the question of how this is likely to affect the political situation now and in the future.

My main fear for Syria's future is the interference of foreign states, in particular Israel and Turkey. These states represent an enormous threat to the country's future. But Syrians will continue to fight imperialism as they have fought Russian and Iranian imperialism in recent years. Perhaps now that the imperialisms they are fighting are not popular with part of the 'anti-imperialist' left, they will get more support for their struggle. But in fighting imperialism, we must not erase the Syrians on the ground. We should listen to them and learn from them. Geopolitics is only part of the story. At the end of the day, the future of Syria will be decided by the Syrians and nobody else. The last two weeks have taught us that. That's why people need to stand in solidarity with the progressive and democratic forces on the ground, to make sure they have more strength and can counterbalance the many counter-revolutionary forces we face.

In the 13 years between now and the start of the Syrian revolution, many political experiments have succeeded one another, have been fought over and have overlapped. First there were the local councils and their coordination committees, which organised themselves horizontally in the face of the need to survive the regime's repression and its abandonment or flight from whole swathes of the country. There is Rojava, which is trying to organise the communalism advocated by the PKK but also controlled by it. And of course there is the Islamic State, a fascist theocracy. Each of these experiments, whether they have been wiped out or are struggling to survive, contains an imaginary world, a system of desire and an interpretation of the world that have necessarily outlived them. In the same way that the Paris Commune, 150 years later, still inspires our imaginations. What do you think remains of this today in Syria? Do any of them seem renewable or desirable to you, or are we witnessing a completely new situation?

We are still in the early days of the regime's collapse, but Syrians are already organising themselves. The revolutionary experience may have been crushed, but it is never dead. It lives on in the Syrians who lived it, and it has changed us forever. The experience of local coordination committees and local councils across Syria is rich in lessons. The same is true of the experience of the Kurdish-controlled regions in northern Syria, which has continued to this day, even though it is now under threat. I believe that over the coming months we will see the Syrians revive and continue this legacy, the question being whether the world will support them.

<https://freedomnews.org.uk/2024/12/18/leila-al-shami-the-future-of-syria-will-be-decided-by-the-syrians-and-nobody-else/>

From Syria to Palestine, liberation comes from below

Joseph Daher explains why the Assad regime's toppling in Syria is important to liberation efforts across the region, especially for the Palestinian struggle. (11.12.24)

Prior to the toppling of Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria over the weekend, divisions within the international Palestinian solidarity movement had started to form when news hit that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the pro-Turkey "Syrian National Army" (SNA) had captured Aleppo and other territories. Some argued that this military offensive led by "Al-Qaida and other terrorists" was a Western-imperialist plot against the Syrian regime, in order to weaken the so-called "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and Hezbollah.

Thousands of Shia Jihadi militants from Hizbollah are also fighting and have been involved in brutal attacks such as on the town of Qusair. Incidentally, Greek fascists from Black Lilly are also in Syria fighting for the regime. This is where anti-war and anti-intervention activists should focus their attention.

Finally, how can Greeks best stand in solidarity with the Syrian Uprising?

It is important that visible solidarity from outside is given to those in Syria that are still struggling to overthrow the tyranny of the regime and anarchists can give support to libertarian tendencies within the broader movement. After two and a half years of struggle and in the face of the regime's brutality and an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation, it is easy to understand that revolutionaries in Syria are tired. Over 130,000 have been killed, entire civilian neighborhoods destroyed, 2.2 million have fled the country, and tens of thousands are rotting in Assad's prisons. This is compounded when faced with the idiotic debates surrounding their struggle that has come from a section of the left. It is important to challenge the simplistic binary narrative that we have to choose between the Assad regime and Al Qaeda. There are no chocolate box revolutions. In the course of any revolutionary process numerous competing actors will emerge, many of them reactionary. We have to stand in solidarity with those whose vision we share, right up until the last person left and there are many positive initiatives to support in Syria.

In terms of Greece specifically, many Syrian refugees have been coming to Greece and we have also witnessed tragic incidents of them drowning at sea. It is important to challenge the Dublin Regulation which Greece has signed and the practices of border police including the illegal detention of refugees and mistreatment in detention. There have also been reports of armed special units firing on and threatening Syrian refugees to prevent them from landing in Greece. These people are fleeing unimaginable violence and conditions in Syria and have the right to be granted asylum and treated in a dignified and humane way. Once in Greece, solidarity can be given to Syrians, and refugees from other countries, to ensure they have housing and other basic needs provided.

[1] Syria Freedom Forever, 'Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria' <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/sectarianism-and-the-assad-regime-in-syria/>

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2013/11/28/interview-with-leila-shrooms-by-apatris-on-the-syrian-revolution/>

revolutionary organization. Also in areas liberated from the state Local Councils have been established which act as the primary civil administrative structure. These ensure the provision of basic services (such as electricity, health care, garbage disposal and water supply), coordinate with the activists of local committees and coordinate with the popular armed resistance to ensure security. They are often made up of the civilian activists that had participated in demonstrations as well as people selected for their technical or professional abilities. Many of these people come from the middle classes in contrast to the formal opposition in exile, comprised mainly of people from richer families, which explains some of the tension between these two groups and lack of outside support. There is no one model for the Local Councils, but they mainly follow some form of representative democratic model and free local elections have occurred in areas where they have been established, something that has not happened in Syria under four decades of Baath rule. Challenges include scarcity of resources, as very little aid has come in from outside which hinders the councils in fulfilling their functions and providing for citizens. In some areas councils have also struggled to maintain independence from armed groups and in areas where militant Jihadist groups (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and Jabhat al Nusra) are strong, such as parts of northern Syria, these groups have tried to set up parallel institutions such as Islamic courts.

How is the armed resistance structured?

The Syrian uprising was armed early on because the people faced a fascist regime that was prepared to use the full military force of the state to crush any opposition to its rule. Initially civilians took up arms and formed neighborhood militias to protect towns and protect demonstrators. On the 29 July 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by officers who defected from the regime because they refused to be fired on protesters.

The FSA has two main components: *Former generals and soldiers of the regime*. There are many different battalions and they are connected from local battalions to regional military councils, the FSA leadership and ultimately to the Syrian National Coalition (mainstream opposition in exile). *Parts of the civilian population that are against the regime*. Many of these operate outside of the formal chain of command and are organized according to local affiliations. Some are openly critical of the FSA leadership and SNC leadership abroad.

There are FSA battalions that consist of Alawite Muslims, Kurds, Christians as well as Sunni Muslims. There are also women only battalions. These groups are united in the goal of overthrowing Assad and establishing a democratic state and the FSA leadership has a secular agenda.

There has also been a rise of more hardline Islamic or Salafi brigades which are not part of the Free Syrian Army structure. They are becoming an increasingly dominant presence in the armed opposition and recently the Islamic Front was formed bringing together the largest Islamist battalions. Whilst I see this as a worrying development, despite the clear military advantages to creating unity amongst fighting forces, it still remains to be seen how the Islamic Front engages with the (overwhelmingly secular) civil resistance, FSA and political processes.

Is it true that the FSA is dominated by Al Qaeda?

There are two major militant Jihadi/Al-Qaeda linked groups operating in Syria; Jabhat Al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). They are a counter-revolutionary force, which are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to establish a global Islamic Caliphate based on their puritanical interpretation of Islam. These groups have much more sophisticated weaponry than the FSA, mainly supplied by private donors from Gulf countries. They have consolidated their hold on some northern areas and tried to impose their strict interpretation of Islam on the population. They have committed many abuses such as detention of opposition activists, executions and sectarian killings.

The civilian resistance against such groups is strong and we have seen wide-spread protests against them in cities where they are dominant such as Al Raqqa and Aleppo. The FSA is also engaged in battles with Al Qaeda affiliated groups and they were notably excluded from the Islamic Front. Whilst such groups will cause havoc in Syria and the region for a long time to come, I think

the assumption that they can impose their vision on Syria in the future is grossly overstated. They are small in number, comprised mainly of foreigners and have no popular support base. Of course, the longer conflict occurs in Syria, the more they could increase in strength.

How are things right now in Syrian Kurdistan?

The Kurdish people have been denied their right to self-determination and faced brutal repression by the state for decades. Since July 2012 the Syrian government left the majority of the Kurdish areas and there is now autonomous Kurdish government. Kurdish areas are governed by the Kurdish Supreme Committee which is an alliance between the main political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which dominates, and the smaller Kurdish National Council (KNC). There are major political divisions within the Syrian Kurdish community and rivalries between the main factions. The PYD has faced criticism for its authoritarian policies and specifically repression against Kurdish activists including pro-revolutionary youth activists and political activists from opposing parties. The PYD has also faced accusations of collaboration with the Assad regime.

Kurds have joined the FSA in the fight against Assad and others are part of Salafist brigades/the Islamic Front. But the strongest Kurdish militia is the YPG linked to the PYD. Periodically the YPG has been engaged in clashes with the FSA. Kurdish fighters have also been fighting militant Jihadi groups as Kurdish areas have suffered brutal assaults by such groups in recent months. The mainstream opposition in exile has sidelined the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish people, but the popular civil resistance has vocally supported the Kurdish right to self-determination. Kurds have played an active role throughout the uprising and there are many initiatives where Kurds and Arabs have joined together in their opposition to the Syrian regime and to fight against increasing sectarianism. For example in August, joint protests were held in the Ashrafieh district of Aleppo calling for unity and an end to assaults carried out by extremist Jihadi groups. Recently, a campaign has been launched called “Khorzeh-Ana Akhuk” which in Kurdish and Arabic means “I am your brother” to promote unity and co-existence between Arabs and Kurds.

It is a fact that the Western forces have not essentially helped the rioters, while officially the Syrian regime has been blacklisted by them. Why do you believe this happened?

We should not expect support to be given to the popular resistance on the ground. No state has an interest in seeing a popular revolutionary movement succeed. The West, as well as Turkey and the Gulf States have recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the “legitimate” representatives of the Syrian people. They hope to influence the SNC in a way which is favorable to their long-term interests. It is important to note that the SNC has little legitimacy amongst revolutionaries inside Syria. It is often referred to as “the five star hotel opposition” and is criticized for being detached from realities on the ground, unable to unify to bring about meaningful change on the revolutions key demands, and influenced by outside agendas. Promises of support to the opposition from the West (including military support to the FSA) has been mainly empty rhetoric. There has been little will to find a political solution to this conflict or even take relatively simple actions such as giving adequate humanitarian assistance to the more than 2 million people living in squalid conditions in refugee camps across the region. No one nowadays is seriously talking about regime change. We expect a solution will be forced on the people where Assad goes but the regime stays in place.

Do you think there will be foreign military intervention in Syria?

Personally I don't believe the West has any real desire to get involved militarily in Syria. Syria is still a powerful state and has powerful allies. We heard talk of airstrikes for three weeks following the chemical attacks in Ghouta. I believe Obama was backed into a corner because he made his ‘red line’ conditions and did not want it to look like the US is becoming irrelevant in the region. The reality is US power is declining.

There already is foreign military intervention in Syria, and apart from the Al Qaeda affiliated militant Jihadis mentioned above, the intervention has mainly been on the side of the regime. Russia has given massive military support to Assad and there are Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria.

These states, they claimed, were allies of the Palestinians, and undermining them meant weakening the struggle for the liberation of Palestine. And, that the military offensive by HTS and SNA took place only one day after the conclusion of a ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel, was deemed suspicious.

However, this entire description of the context has many shortcomings, and if anything, it shows a lack of understanding of Syrian and regional dynamics.

The real context

The military offensive led by HTS and SNA took place at a time when the main allies of the Syrian regime were weakened. The Russian military forces had been focusing on their imperialist war against Ukraine, while Iran and Hezbollah had taken a blow following Israel's war in Lebanon. This all reflected the overall structural weakness of the Syrian regime militarily, economically and politically, hence why it collapsed like a house of cards.

The Turkish government most likely assisted the military offensive against the regime in one way or another. Certainly, Ankara's initial objective was to improve its position in future negotiations with the Syrian regime, and with Iran and Russia in particular. However, with the fall of the regime it stood to play an even bigger role. Through the territories conquered by the SNA it also sought to weaken the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which are dominated by the armed wing of the Kurdish party PYD (the sister organization of the PKK).

After the SNA captured the Tal Rifaat and Shahba areas in Northern Aleppo and of the city of Minbej – previously under the governance of the SDF – this led to over 150,000 civilians being displaced and many violations of human rights against Kurds, including assassinations.

In the lead up to Assad's toppling, HTS had relative autonomy vis-à-vis Turkey. The successful seizure of Aleppo showed its evolution into a more disciplined and structured organization that has brought together a number of military groups under its wing over the years. Whilst it was considered a terrorist organization by the UN, US, Turkey and other countries, since its rupture with al-Qaeda in 2016, it was attempting to project a more moderate image as a rational and responsible actor.

However, it remains an authoritarian organization with an Islamic fundamentalist ideological orientation and foreign fighters within its ranks. Many demonstrations took place in Idlib denouncing HTS' rule and its violations of political freedoms and human rights. Both SNA and HTS are threats for a democratic Syria.

Neither the US nor Israel had a hand in these events, in fact, they were worried about the events leading up to now. Israeli officials, for example, declared that the ‘collapse of the Assad regime would likely create chaos in which military threats against Israel would develop.’ Moreover, since 2011, Israel has never really been in favour of the Syrian regime being overthrown.

In July 2018 Netanyahu had no objection to Assad taking back control of the country and stabilising his power. He said Israel would only act against perceived threats, such as Iran and Hezbollah's forces/influence, explaining, “We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights”.

As this stable actor is no more, Israel took matters into its own hands. Indeed in the days following the fall of the Syrian regime, the Israeli occupation army invaded the Syrian part of Mount Hermon, in the Golan Heights. It sought to prevent the rebels from seizing the area, and carried out over 350 strikes on anti-aircraft batteries, military airfields, weapons production sites, combat aircraft and missiles. Missile vessels struck the Syrian naval facilities of Al-Bayda port and Latakia port where 15 Syrian naval vessels were docked.

These raids aim to destroy Syria's military capabilities to prevent them being used against Israel. It is also seeding the message that the Israeli occupation army can cause political instability at any time, should the future government adopt a hostile position that doesn't serve Israel's interests.

“Axis of Resistance” versus struggle from below

Alongside ignoring the agency of local Syrian actors, the main issue with the argument promoted by the supporters of the so-called “Axis of Resistance” within the Palestinian solidarity movement, is that it suggests liberation of Palestine will come from above. These states, despite their reactionary and authoritarian nature, and neoliberal economic orientation, will somehow deliver freedom.

This ignores that their foreign policies are shaped by the need to protect their own political interests, and that regional authoritarian states have repeatedly betrayed and repressed the Palestinians.

While rhetorically supporting the Palestinian cause and funding Hamas, since 7 October 2023, Iran has sought, to improve its standing in the region in order to be in the best position for future negotiations with the US. It is therefore keen to avoid any direct war with Israel. Its main geopolitical objective in relation to the Palestinians is therefore to use them as leverage.

Similarly, Iran's passivity towards Israel's attacks on Lebanon – which was particularly visible following the assassination of key Hezbollah cadres – has demonstrated its first priority is protecting its own geopolitical interests. Not to mention, Iran didn't hesitate to reduce its funding to Hamas in the past when their interests did not match: like when uprisings erupted in Syria in 2011 and the Palestinian movement refused to support the Assad regime's murderous repression of protesters.

Similarly, the Syrian regime didn't respond to Israel's war on Gaza, despite also facing attacks. Indeed, it has been avoiding any direct confrontation with Israel since 1974.

The regime has actually historically repressed Palestinians in Syria, and killed many since 2011. It also destroyed Yarmouk camp in Damascus which was home to a considerable Palestinian refugee population.

In the last few days, 630 Palestinian political prisoners were released from Sednaya prison alone.

The regime also attacked the Palestinian national movement.

Furthermore, in 1976 Hafez al-Assad's regime intervened against Palestinian national movement and Lebanese left wing organisations to support far-right political parties in Lebanon. It also carried out military operations against Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut in 1985 and 1986. In 1990 approximately 2,500 Palestinian political prisoners were detained in Syrian prisons.

Supporters of the “Axis of resistance” are also ignoring or refusing to accept the statement by Hamas that congratulates the Syrian people for achieving their “aspirations for freedom and justice” after toppling Bashar al-Assad.

Liberation for all

The list of historical crimes against Palestinians by the Assad regime do not, of course, undermine the fact that US imperialism remains exceptionally destructive and deadly. However, supporting authoritarian and despotic regimes undermines the objective liberating of Palestine. It is accepting that oppression will continue in other parts of the region in the name of freeing one people, which is neither what the Palestinian struggle calls for, nor could it actually deliver the goal.

What happens in the region is ultimately directly linked to the future of Palestine.

A considerable majority of the MENA region's popular classes identify with the Palestinian struggle and see it as linked to their own local battles for democracy and equality. It is important that those organising in solidarity with Palestine understand that Palestinian and regional popular classes are central social forces capable of creating the conditions required to achieve liberation, with their support.

When Palestinians fight, this triggers a regional liberation movement, and the regional movement in turn fuels that of occupied Palestine.

Far-right minister Avigdor Lieberman recognised the danger that popular uprisings in the MENA posed to Israel back in 2011, when he said the Egyptian revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak was a greater threat to Israel than Iran.

This is not to deny the right of resistance of Palestinians and Lebanese against Israel, but to explain that the united revolt of popular classes has the power to transform the entire region, topple authoritarian regimes and expel the US and other imperialist powers.

The main task of the international solidarity movement for Palestine, particularly in the West, is to denounce the complicit role of our ruling classes in supporting the racist settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel. We must pressure them to break off any political, economic, and military relations with Tel Aviv. This is the only way that Israel weakened, and in turn the path to the liberation of Palestine and the region more widely, can be paved.

As a Syrian revolutionary wrote from the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights in the summer of 2014: “freedom—a common destiny for Gaza, Yarmouk and the Golan.” This slogan holds out the hope of regional revolutionary transformation, the only realistic strategy for liberation.

https://www.newarab.com/opinion/syria-palestine-liberation-comes-below

Free Syria's first days: The good, the bad, and the ugly

A free Syria is a blessing after Assad's fall. And though the future is uncertain, Syrians are determined to shape their destiny, says Robin Yassin-Kassab. (10.12.24)

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

We feared the regime's end would be accompanied by a bloodbath. Thank God, that hasn’t happened. In the end the regime collapsed without a fight, even in its supposed heartland on the coast.

There has been some looting in Damascus, which has been somewhat more chaotic than the northern cities, perhaps because there has been a smaller rebel presence. Otherwise, the news coming from liberated Syria has been surprisingly good.

On the social level, Syrians are talking the language of reconciliation. One typical video shows a bearded rebel admonishing surrendered regime fighters for standing with the side that slaughtered women and children. Then he tells them, "Go! You are free!"

The rebels have issued a general amnesty for military personnel. This does not extend to those guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The intention is to hold those people to account.

Meanwhile, Mohammed al-Bashir, who was the prime minister in Idlib’s Salvation Government, has been appointed to form a Transitional Government in Damascus. The Salvation Government ruled in HTS territory, but was civilian, largely technocratic, and fairly independent. It looks as if a similar logic is going to apply to the Transitional Government.

Having shed his *nom de guerre*, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani is now known by his real name, Ahmad al-Sharaa. Instead of 'leader of HTS', he has been rebranded as "commander of military operations".

He wants to be seen as a national figure rather than a Sunni jihadist. Some fear that he will change direction as soon as Western states stop branding him a terrorist, but for now at least his direction is tolerant and democratic. Rebels have been told not to interfere in women’s clothing choices, for instance. And prominent opposition figures say that UN Resolution 2254 will be implemented. This will involve drafting a new constitution and holding free and fair elections under UN supervision.

So far so good. All of it inspires confidence in Syrians at home as well as the millions who were driven from their homes. Huge streams of people are leaving the tented camps on the country’s borders, and returning from Turkey and Lebanon, where so often they were subjected to racist abuse and violence.

The result is thousands of emotional reunions between siblings, or between parents and children, who in many cases haven’t seen each other in over a decade.

This is a blessing that nobody expected a fortnight ago, and it culminates a drama that has lasted almost 14 years. In 2011, millions of Syrians screamed *Irhal!* – Get out! – at Assad. His response was to drive them out instead. But today, at last, the Assad family are the refugees.

Healing Syria after Assad's hurt

It’s also very good that tens of thousands of prisoners have been liberated from Assad’s dungeons. But it’s bad – profoundly depressing, in fact – that so many are in such a bad state. Lots of women and children have been found behind bars. The children were either arrested by the regime along with their parents or were born in these dungeons to mothers who had been raped.

Some people have been found who were presumed to be dead. Many Lebanese have been liberated, and Jordanians and Palestinians, including Hamas members.

Some of the prisoners had been "behind the sun", as Syrians say, for over four decades. Some who were liberated thought Hafez al-Assad was still president (he died in 2000). Many of those coming blinking into the light are emaciated or disabled by torture. Some seem to have lost their memories or their sanity.

The worst images are coming from Sadynaya Prison. Amnesty International called Sadynaya 'the human slaughterhouse', and estimated that between 5,000 and 13,000 people were extra-judicially executed there between September 2011 and December 2015 alone. It now seems the total number of murders is much higher than that.

At least 130,000 people were estimated lost in the Assadist gulag. Fadel Abdulghany, head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, said yesterday (December 9) he believes that the vast majority of prisoners have been murdered.

The well-known activist Mazen Hamada has been found dead in Sadynaya. Rooms full of discarded clothes and shoes, presumably belonging to the murdered, have been discovered. One room was filled with bags of noosed rope, for hangings. An 'execution press' for crushing bodies has been found, and a mass grave packed with bodies partially dissolved in acid. Piles of corpses have also been uncovered at Harasta Military Hospital.

It is thought that these people were murdered at Sadynaya, and then their bodies moved. It seems that very many were murdered very recently, even as the regime was collapsing.

After over half a century, Syrians are finally emerging from the horror of one of history's worst torture states.

The legacy of death camps like Sadynaya is added – along with the cratered economy and the war-ravaged infrastructure – to the list of traumatising challenges facing the country. Syrians need help, solidarity and understanding from the rest of the world.

But what is the ill-named 'international community' giving Syrians instead?

Israel – armed by the US, UK, Germany and others – is giving them crazy bombing. The Zionist state has struck hundreds of targets, not only weapons sites – so that a free and independent Syria will be defenceless – but also buildings containing documentation. It aims to destroy, one must presume, evidence of its collaborations with the regime, and perhaps its American ally's collaborations too.

Israel is also advancing further into the Golan Heights, creating "a buffer zone" to protect the illegally occupied territory which Bashar’s father Hafez al-Assad withdrew from without a fight in 1967 (he was defence minister at the time). The Assad regime under both father and son protected Israeli security on the border better than the states which had signed peace agreements with Israel.

The regime also locked up any Syrian who organised against Zionism in any way at all. One of the prisoners freed yesterday was Tal al-Mallouhi. Tal was arrested in 2009, aged 19, merely for writing poems and blog posts which urged solidarity with Palestine. This is why the fall of Assad has enraged Israel.

Interview with Apatris on the Syrian revolution

Leila Al Shami (28.11.13)

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

What was the social, economic and political situation in Syria before the uprising?

The Baath party came to power in 1963, following a military coup. At that time Baathism was a mixture of Pan-Arab, Arab nationalist and Arab socialist ideology. Hafez Al Assad came to power in 1970 through an internal coup and ruled for 40 years. He dismantled much of the socialist outlook of the party (the coup was against its left-wing faction) and he built up a patriotic capitalist class. Under his rule a leadership cult was formed, Syria became a totalitarian police state and there was mass persecution of political dissidents. Whilst the Baath party formed a coalition with 6 small mainly communist/socialist /nationalist parties to make up the National Progressive Front the Baath party dominates and in effect it is a one-party state.

When Hafez died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited the dictatorship. He was originally seen as a reformist and this climate of optimism gave birth to a movement known as the Damascus Spring. It was an intellectual led movement asking for political reforms such as the release of political prisoners and the right to form political parties and civil organizations (which are either banned or subject to strict control). It also called for an end to Emergency Law, in place since 1963, which effectively suspended all constitutional rights of citizens and empowered security forces. By Autumn 2001 the key leaders of this movement were in prison and hopes for political reforms ended. Under Bashar there was wide-spread persecution of political and human rights activists. Arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances were common practice. The Kurds (9 per cent of the population) also suffered severe repression at the hands of the state. An uprising of Kurds took place in March 2004, many were killed and more than 2 thousand were arrested. Draconian measures controlled and censored both Internet and press.

Following the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, Bashar implemented wide ranging neo-liberal economic reforms. State farms were privatized, a private banking system was introduced, there was a promotion of private-sector led investment with key industrial sectors brought under private sector control, and a reduction in subsidies. International investment flooded in particularly from the Gulf. These reforms were not accompanied by policies to re-distribute wealth or ensure social protection. Inequality grew between the rich and poor and the urban/rural divide was exacerbated. Assad loyalists and the business class benefited from these policies. Bashar’s inner circle, including from his family and members of the Alawite sect to which he belongs became very wealthy. It is estimated that Bashar’s cousin, Rami Makhlouf, controlled about 60% of the Syrian economy through his business interests. The Sunni and Christian bourgeois also benefited from these policies as the regime built economic ties with individuals from different communities to ensure their loyalty. Meanwhile the poor were disenfranchised and the cost of living rose. Syrians living under poverty line increased from 11 per cent in 2000 to 34.5 per cent in 2010 (7 million people) in rural areas it stood at 62 per cent. Unemployment rates were high, especially for the youth who lacked job opportunities.

Therefore which social groups were prominent in the outbreak of the revolt?

Inspired by the revolutionary wave sweeping the region, the uprising began in rural areas and cities with high poverty rates such as Deraa and Homs; those which had suffered the most from the neo-liberal project. The main Kurdish cities were also amongst the first to hold large protests. Apart from some small and daring protests, the centers of capital (Aleppo and Damascus) failed to join uprising for months and some (regime sponsored) protests were organized in support of Bashar.

Workers (despite the difficulties in organizing because of Baath domination of Unions) have played an important role in the movement. Successful general strikes and civil disobedience campaigns throughout December 2011 paralyzed large sections of the economy. The response of the

Assad regime was to lay off more than 85,000 workers and close more than 187 factories between January and February 2012 (according to official figures).[1] The regime also increased wages to public sector staff in its attempt to crush the uprising.

The core of the grassroots opposition has been and remains the youth, mainly from the poor and middle-classes, in which women and diverse religious and ethnic groups play active roles. Many of these activists remain non-affiliated to traditional political ideologies but are instead motivated by concerns for freedom, dignity and basic human rights. Their primary objective has remained the overthrow of the regime, rather than developing grand proposals for a future Syria.

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

What has been the role of anarchism in Syria and the Syrian Revolution?

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

Syrians have been at the forefront of the development of anarchism regionally. In the 19th century the main centers of Arab anarchism were Beirut, Alexandria and Cairo. The two primary periodicals for the dissemination of radical ideas in these cities were *Al Hilal* and *Al Muqtataf*, both established by Syrians. Syrian actors also brought anarchist ideas to the workers of these cities through radical theatre.

One of the leading contemporary Arab anarchists is Syrian, Mazen Km Al Maz. He has been writing regularly in Arabic on current affairs for the past decade, and has translated western anarchist literature into Arabic. Nader Atassi, is one Syrian anarchist who blogs in English under the name Darth Nader. Political organization has been highly restricted in Syria for decades and anarchist networks are small and emerging. Yet anarchist tendencies in the Syrian revolution have been the strongest we have seen in any of the Arab Spring countries and the experiments in autonomous self-organization outside of the boundaries of the state and independent of political or institutional leadership provide valuable lessons for anarchist organizing globally.

The main form of revolutionary organization in Syria has been through the development of local committees. Hundreds have been established in neighborhoods and towns across the country. This form of organization was inspired by Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz. He believed that it didn’t make sense for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to their lives within the authoritarian structures of the state. Aziz advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization in order to challenge the foundations of a system built on exploitation and oppression. His ideas have had a huge impact on revolutionary organization in Syria. In the local committees revolutionary activists engage in multiple activities, from documenting and reporting on violations carried out by the regime (and increasingly elements of the opposition) to organizing protests and civil disobedience campaigns (such as strikes and refusing to pay utility bills). They collect and provide aid and humanitarian supplies to areas under bombardment or siege. The committees operate as horizontally organized, autonomous, leaderless groups, made up of all segments of the society (including minorities such as Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds). They have been the foundation of the revolutionary movement based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid.

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

What are the external forces which are involved in the Syrian conflict?

There is a vicious geo-political struggle or proxy war being fought over Syria. On the global level this is taking place between the US and Russia and on the regional level between the Sunni axis (Gulf States) and Shia axis (Iran and Hizbullah). All of these actors are struggling to ensure that any outcome is favorable to their own interests and maintains or expands their power and hegemony in the region. There is also a violent counter revolution occurring inside Syria, with the rise of extremist Jihadi groups, many of them foreigners, who are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to impose their own religious agenda. None of these factors detract from the fact that there is also a popular struggle on the ground and revolutionary groups stand against both the regime and counter-revolutionary forces.

(The following is a transcript of a video I made for the New Arab website.)

How are the rebels organized in the liberated areas?

I have explained above about the local committees being central to

“*From the PYD’s point of view, this was a golden opportunity to impose its authority and expand its sphere of influence in the Kurdish areas in Syria. This political pragmatism and thirst for power are two important factors in understanding the party’s dealings with the regime, the revolution, the FSA, and even the Kurds themselves. They also help explain many phenomena that seem to bewilder some commentators and analysts, such as the suppression by PYD forces of independent activists and those critical of the party’s policies, in much the same vein as the Baathist regime did. By way of example, one can cite in this regard the Amuda massacre in July 2013, in which the People’s Protection Units (YPG) opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, or the closure of the new independent radio station Arta in February 2014, under the pretext that it was not ‘licensed’. The PYD’s forces have also assaulted members of other Kurdish political parties and arrested some of them under a variety of excuses; they have been controlling food and financial resources in the Kurdish areas and distributing them in an unjust manner on the basis of partisan favouritism, and so on and so forth. Such practices remind people, rightly, of the oppressive practices of the Assad regime.*”

An obvious tension therefore exists between the authoritarianism of the old guard of the PYD which maintains a top down vision, and the thousands of Kurds who believe in, and are trying to realize, radical democracy from below and should be supported in that aim. But the Kurdish region of Syria is not the only place where a social revolution is putting into place radically new ways of organizing, although it has benefited from greater space and stability, relatively speaking when compared with other areas of the country. Experiments in local, autonomous, self organization have been a defining feature of the Syrian revolution, and hundreds of local committees and local councils have been established to administer basic services and coordinate revolutionary activities. Yet these people are not seen to be deserving of international solidarity because they have no leader who has converted to libertarian municipalism. The fact simply is that they have no leader at all and these forms of horizontal organization arose spontaneously from below as a response to the destruction of the State.

Furthermore, as the world’s attention focuses on Kobane, struggles elsewhere have failed to gain the media spotlight. In August, the people of Deir Al Zour, mainly from Al-Sheitat tribe, led a brave resistance against Daesh. In the following days, facing the fascists alone, the resistance was almost defeated and some 700 people from the al-Sheitat tribe were executed by Daesh causing little global outrage. But the people of Deir Al Zour didn’t abandon their struggle against the ISIS extremists. In recent weeks the White Shroud (Kufn Al Abyaad) has killed some 100 Daesh fighters through guerrilla style attacks. This secretive popular resistance group is made up of around 300 locals, the majority of whom have never fought before but have taken up what arms they can raise to protect their families and communities from fascist onslaught.

As the world focuses on Daesh’s advances in northern Syria, communities elsewhere are continuing to resist the genocidal maniac Bashar Al Assad and his sectarian militias which have increased their assault on liberated areas since US airstrikes freed up the regime’s resources elsewhere. There’s been little solidarity shown with the people of Al Waer district of Homs, the last rebel stronghold in a city which was once the soul of the revolution. Al Waer is home to some 400,000 people, half of them displaced civilians who have fled conflict elsewhere in the country. The area has been under regime siege for months and in the past couple of weeks the Assad regime has intensified its shelling causing a massive humanitarian crisis. Syrian activists’ calls for solidarity with Al Waer have fallen on deaf ears.

The question that remains is whether international solidarity for Kobane arises from the Kurdish ethnicity of its defenders (i.e. they’re not Sunni Arabs), from support for the political position of a party (the PYD/PKK), or from the principle that all people have the right to defend themselves from terror, whether in the form of religious or nationalist fascism and to determine for themselves how to organize their lives and communities. If it arises from the latter principle, then the same solidarity extended to the Kurds must be extended to all revolutionary Syrians.

https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/the-struggle-for-kobane-an-example-of-selective-solidarity/comment-page-1/

Mutual struggle, mutual solidarity

Leila Al Shami (29.7.14)

I spent a lot of time in Gaza during the first two years of the Syrian revolution. Unlike in other social contexts, where I often hesitated to talk about Syria fearful of having to deal with stupid reactions or banal analysis, in Gaza this wasn’t an issue with people I met. Gazans who experience terror on a daily basis never failed to ask me how my family in Syria was doing, or express their solidarity with the Syrian uprising against the terror of the Assad regime. Through their own experience, they empathized with the suffering of the Syrian people, understood their desire for freedom and supported their resistance to tyranny.

The news that well over a thousand people have been killed in Israel’s latest onslaught on Gaza is sickening. One of the most advanced militaries in the world is raining down bombs on 1.8 million people, over half of them children. There is no place for Gazans to escape or to seek shelter and protection with their families. They are under blockade, locked into an open air prison, in one of the most densely populated places on earth. Whole families have been massacred; houses destroyed; hospitals, schools and essential services such as water and electricity supply have been targeted. It is horror beyond words.

Once again the Zionist State continues its onslaught with the acquiescence, or worse, the direct complicity of regional powers who have never done anything better than voice empty rhetoric in support of the Palestinian resistance. In fact, they have done far worse. Sisi’s regime in Egypt collaborates with Israel to maintain the blockade, and with both Israel and Saudi Arabia to pressure the Palestinian resistance to submit to a ceasefire on Israel’s terms. Meanwhile, Sisi sends weapons to support Assad’s tyranny in Syria and crushes political opposition at home. The Assad regime, that supposed bastion of the Palestinian people’s struggle for liberation, has not fired one rocket in the direction of its border with Israel since 1973. Currently it busies itself with crushing the Palestinian people in Yarmouk Camp, Damascus, with its own crippling blockade, and raining bombs down on civilians in Aleppo. And the Palestinian Authority, with its illusory quasi-state trappings, has once again shown it’s nothing more than an Israeli and Western stooge contracted out in the service of the occupation and the Ramallah elite.

But the people of the region are not represented by their leaders. Solidarity protests with Gaza have been held in Yemen, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon. In Egypt, at the regular protests against Sisi’s coup regime, people are chanting for Gaza. Likewise in Syria, even as Assad’s barrel bombs fall on residential areas, even as the Islamic State carries out its murderous, expansionist onslaught, even as this month alone has witnessed the death of over 3000 Syrians, men and women from Aleppo to Daraa have raised slogans in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Gaza. Across the West Bank and 48, Palestinians have courageously risen in numbers not seen since the Intifadas.

Just as the struggle to stop the bombs raining down on Gaza should not be divorced from the broader struggle to stop the Zionist colonial and apartheid project, backed by imperial powers, neither should the struggle of the Palestinian people be divorced from the broader struggle for freedom and emancipation from tyranny across the region. Only when the revolutionary aspirations of the people of the region are realized, only when the people are freed from the yoke of these current Arab leaders and the States that back them, will the liberation of Palestine pass through every city in the region and translate into practical action, side by side with the Palestinian resistance, to defeat the Zionist colonial project.

https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2014/07/29/mutual-struggle-mutual-solidarity/

No Western power has condemned Israel’s unprovoked assault on free Syria. They have made their enmity to Syrians clear from the first minutes of the liberation. And this potentially makes all of our futures not just bad, but very ugly indeed. May the Syrian people prevail.

https://www.newarab.com/opinion/free-syrias-first-days-good-bad-and-ugly-0

Bashar al-Assad's terror state is gone: Syria can breathe again

Syria has finally broken free of Bashar al-Assad's chains. Whatever comes next, the Syrian people can be assured of their heroism, argues Karim Safieddine. (10.12.24)

Syria has changed forever. The Syrian people have overthrown the al-Assad family's 53-year tyranny, which was supported by international and regional powers that were determined to maintain the chains of pain and torture in prisons which crushed the bones of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese.

Syria now enters a period of uncertainty, producing a sense of collective anxiety amongst Syrians worried about the next few decades, remaining sceptical about the future and all that has occurred. But it has also produced an array of possibilities, destroying the status quo while maintaining structures of stability.

To many in the world, this was merely a "conflict", a "clash" between "Syrians" of "different backgrounds". It was a "civil war".

To some others, it also embodied a "proxy war" between nations and peoples battling on Syrian grounds. To a specific subset of anti-imperialist intellectuals, it was an "external war against the Syrian people", launched by the United States, NATO, and other malicious actors "pulling the strings".

The world silenced the Syrian Revolution. The world erased the Syrian people. It subsequently downplayed the Assad regime’s psychopathic dungeons. Learning the lessons directly from the pro-Israel playbook, the world complicated the most uncomplicated sense of injustice and revival.

But let’s decomplicate the deliberately complicated: What is the Assad regime? And what is the Great Syrian Revolution?

The Assad regime did not have "faults". It didn’t "commit mistakes". It didn’t "conduct strategic errors". It didn’t "not do enough for Palestine".

The Assad regime is a gang. It is a group of twisted, sadistic monsters. The Assad regime is a source which is not only pathological in of itself, it attempted to pathologise the Syrian people. It promoted psychopathy amongst its own henchmen and soldiers. It attempted to break the very moral system of Syrian society.

Assad did not "not do enough for Palestine". He is the butcher of Yarmouk. His father was the butcher of the PLO. His family proclaims "love for Palestine", but despises the Palestinian people altogether.

The Baathists weren’t "Arab nationalists with a few sins"; they were outright traitors who sold out the Syrian and Palestinian people. In fact, they used the cause for national liberation to produce more creative, sadistic ways to crush the colonised. The Baathists weren’t a resistance band. They were occupiers in their own right, torturing, repressing, and violating the Lebanese people for decades. The Baathists are quite simply pathetic petite imperialists.

What next for Syria post-Assad?

The Syrian Revolution is one of the most important and courageous social transformations of recent history. It takes the shape of a determined “superhero” of history, reviving itself following periods of social death and periodic episodes of agonising resilience.

I say "transformation" and not "event" because what we witnessed was a revolutionary process and not simply a moment or instance. It is a climaxing

transformation after cycles of disappointment, difficult pushing and building, torture, and hundreds of micro- and macro-lessons learned.

The courage of the revolution is demonstrated not only by its capacity to challenge one of the most psychopathic and monstrous tyrants of our era but also by its capacity to let go of the idols of the opposition itself.

Hundreds of revolutionaries lost their lives protesting, challenging, and critiquing Islamist groups, stressing the need for pluralistic, democratic political alternatives.

Those same revolutionaries joined the ranks of or supported the rebels moving to liberate Assad’s torture dungeons and prisons. In other words, the Syrian people, as we speak, are crushing the same prisons that crushed them.

The Syrians broke their chains when the entire world tried to rehabilitate the monster that tied them up. The revolution proved that no amount of coercion and psychopathic power can break a people.

Those same revolutionaries today are simultaneously hopeful, worried, sceptical, and cautious. The courage of the Revolution revolves around its capacity to renew the lessons of war, institutions, governance, and mutual empathy.

The courage of Syria's revolution revolves around the thousands resisting the temptation of revenge. A courageous, bold, and hopeful Syrian public opinion is alive and breaking free today. It is the Great Syrian Revolution. It is the Great Syrian Revolution. It is the Great Syrian Revolution.

https://www.newarab.com/opinion/bashar-al-assads-terror-state-gone-syria-can-breathe-again

Understanding the rebellion in Syria

An interview with Swiss Syrian socialist Joseph Daher (9.12.24)

How are Syrians feeling after the fall of the regime?

Joseph Daher: The happiness is unbelievable. It is a historic day. 54 years of tyranny of Assad's family is gone. We saw videos of popular demonstrations throughout the country, from Damascus, Tartous, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Qamichli, Suwaida, etc. of all religious sects and ethnicities, destroying statues and symbols of the Assad's family.

And of course, there is great happiness for the liberation of political prisoners from the regime’s prisons, particularly Sednaya prison, known as the “human slaughterhouse” which could contain 10,000-20,000 prisoners. Some of them had been detained since the 1980s. Similarly, people, who had been displaced in 2016 or earlier, from Aleppo and other cities, have been able to return to their homes and neighborhoods, seeing their families for the first time in years.

At the same time, in the first days following the military offensive, popular reactions were initially mixed and confused, reflecting the diversity of political opinion in Syrian society, both within and outside the country. Some sections were very happy with the conquest of these territories and the weakening of the regime, and now its potential fall.

But, some sectors of the population were, and are still, also fearful of HTS and SNA. They are worried about the authoritarian and reactionary nature of these forces and their political project.

And some are worried about what will happen in the new situation. In particular, wide sections of Kurds as well as others, while happy for the fall of the dictatorship of Assad, have issued condemnations of the SNA's forced displacement and assassinations of people.

Can you recount the sequence of events, especially the rebel advance, that defeated Assad’s military forces and led to his downfall? What has happened?

JD: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) launched a military campaign on November 27, 2024 against the Syrian

regime’s forces, scoring stunning victories. In less than a week, HTS and SNA took control of most of Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Then, the city Hama, located 210 kilometers north of Damascus, fell into the hands of HTS and SNA following intense military confrontations between them and regime forces supported by the Russian air force. Following Hama, HTS took control of Homs.

Initially, the Syrian regime sent reinforcements to Hama and Homs, and then, with the support of the Russian air force, bombed the cities of Idlib and Aleppo and its surroundings. On December 1 and 2, more than 50 airstrikes hit Idlib, at least four health facilities, four school facilities, two displacement camps, and a water station were impacted. The airstrikes have displaced over 48,000 people and severely disrupted services and aid delivery. The dictator Bashar al-Assad had promised defeat to his enemies and stated that “terrorism only understands the discourse of force.” But his regime was already crumbling from everywhere.

While the regime was losing town after town, the southern governorates of Suweida and Daraa liberated themselves; their popular and local armed opposition forces, separate and distinct from HTS and SNA, seized control. Regime forces then withdrew from localities about ten kilometers from Damascus, and abandoned their positions in the province of Quneitra, which borders the Golan Heights, which is occupied by Israel.

As different opposition armed forces, again not HTS nor SNA, approached the capital Damascus, regime’s forces just crumbled and withdrew, while demonstrations and the burning of all symbols of Bashar al-Assad multiplied in the various suburbs of Damascus. On the night of December 7 and 8, it was announced that Damascus was liberated. The exact fate and location of Bashar al-Assad was initially unknown, but some information indicated that he was in Russia under the protection of Moscow.

The fall of the regime proved its structural weakness, militarily, economically, and politically. It collapsed like a house of cards. This is hardly surprising because it seemed clear that the soldiers were not going to fight for the Assad regime, given their poor wages and conditions. They preferred to flee or just not fight rather than defend a regime for which they have very little sympathy, especially because a lot of them had been forcefully conscripted.

Alongside these dynamics in the south, others have occurred in different parts of the country since the start of the rebels’ offensive. First, the SNA led attacks on territories controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Aleppo, and then announced the beginning of a new offensive against the northern city of Manbij, which is under the domination of the SDF. On Sunday December 8, with the support of the Turkish army, airforce, and artillery, the SNA entered the city.

Second, the SDF has captured most of Deir-ez-Zor governorate formerly controlled by Syrian regime forces and pro-Iran militias, after they had withdrawn to redeploy in other areas to fight against HTS and SNA. SDF then extended their control over vast swaths of the northeast previously under the regime’s domination.

Who are the rebel forces and in particular the main rebel formation HTS and SNA? What are their politics, program, and project? What do the popular classes think of them?

JD: The successful seizure of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and of other territories in a military campaign led by HTS reflects in many ways the evolution of this movement over several years into a more disciplined and more structured organization, both politically and militarily. It now can produce drones and runs a military academy. HTS has been able to impose its hegemony on a certain number of military groups, through both repression and inclusion in the past few years. Based on these developments, it positioned itself to launch this attack.

It has become a quasi-state actor in the areas it controls. It has established a government, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which acts as HTS’ civil administration and provides services. There has been a clear willingness by HTS and SSG in the past few years to present themselves as a rational force to regional and international powers in order to normalize its rule. This has notably resulted in more and more space for some NGOs to operate in key sectors such as education and healthcare, in which SSG lacks financial resources and expertise.

This does not mean that no corruption exists in areas under its rule. It has enforced its rule through authoritarian measures and policing. HTS has notably repressed or limited activities it considers as contrary to its ideology. For instance, HTS stopped several projects supporting women, particularly camp residents, under the pretext that these cultivated ideas of gender equality that were hostile to its rule. HTS has also targeted and detained political opponents, journalists, activists, and people it viewed as critics or opponents.

HTS—which is still categorized as a terrorist organization by many powers including the U.S.—has also been trying to project a more moderate image of itself, trying to win recognition that it is now a rational and responsible actor. This evolution dates back to the rupture of its ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and its reframing of its political objectives in the Syrian national framework. It has also repressed individuals and groups connected to Al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State.

In February 2021, for his first interview with an U.S.journalist, its leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, or Ahmed al-Sharaa (his real name), declared that the region he controlled “does not represent a threat to the security of Europe and America,” asserting that areas under its rule would not become a base for operations abroad.

In this attempt to define himself as a legitimate interlocutor on the international scene, he emphasized the group’s role in fighting against terrorism. As part of this makeover, it has allowed the return of Christians and Druze in some areas and established contacts with some leaders from these communities.

Following the capture of Aleppo, HTS continued to present itself as a responsible actor. HTS fighters for instance immediately posted videos in front of banks, offering assurances that they wanted to protect private property and assets. They also promised to protect civilians and minority religious communities, particularly Christians, because they know that the fate of this community is closely scrutinized abroad.

Similarly, HTS has made numerous statements promising similar protection of Kurds and Islamic minorities such as Ismaelis and Druzes. It also issued a statement regarding Alawites that called on them to break with the regime, without however suggesting that HTS would protect them or saying anything clear about their future. In this statement, HTS describes the Alawite community as an instrument of the regime against the Syrian people.

Finally, the leader of HTS, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, has stated that the city of Aleppo will be managed by a local authority, and all military forces, including those of HTS, will fully withdraw from the city in the coming weeks. It is clear that al-Jolani wants to actively engage with local, regional, and international powers.

However, it is still an open question as to whether HTS will follow through on these statements. The organization has been an authoritarian and reactionary organization with an Islamic fundamentalist ideology, and still has foreign fighters within its ranks. Many popular demonstrations in the past few years have occurred in Idlib against its rule and violations of political freedoms and human rights, including assassinations and torture of opponents.

It is not enough to tolerate religious or ethnic minorities or allow them to pray. The key issue is recognizing their rights as equal citizens participating in deciding the future of the country. More generally, statements by the head of HTS, al-Jolani, such as “people who fear Islamic governance either have seen incorrect implementations of it or do not understand it properly,” are definitely not reassuring, but quite the opposite.

Regarding the Turkish-backed SNA, it is a coalition of armed groups mostly with Islamic conservative politics. It has a very bad reputation and is guilty of numerous human rights violations especially against Kurdish populations in areas under their control. They have notably participated in the Turkish-led military campaign to occupy Afrin in 2018, leading to the forced displacement of around 150,000 civilians, the vast majority of them Kurds.

In the current military campaign, once again SNA serves mainly Turkish objectives in targeting areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and with large Kurdish populations. The SNA has, for instance, captured the city of Tal Rifaat and Shahba area in northern Aleppo, previously under the governance of the SDF, leading to the forced displacement of more than 150,000 civilians and many violations of human rights against Kurdish

battlefield and in regional public opinion. The Iranian state, therefore, is not a protector of Arab Shia but a threat to their security and wellbeing.

Likewise in Iraq, where before the 2003 invasion and occupation a third of marriages were cross-sect Sunni Shia. Today, after the civil war’s ethnic cleansing, and with ISIS facing not a unified Iraqi army but a collection of Iran-backed Shia militias, it’s hard to see how the country’s sectarian relations can ever be healed. The Iranian state’s undue influence on Iraq’s military and political life has helped strangle both communal coexistence and the possibility of democracy. And Iranian officials openly boast their imperialism. “Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution,” Ali Reza Zakani, an MP close to Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei, said last year (he was referring to Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad).

Of course, more players than just Iran are responsible for Iraq’s dysfunction. The United States must be blamed for the occupation, and the Saddam Hussain regime which fanned sectarianism to divide and rule, specifically to put down the 1991 southern uprising. Sectarian TV channels from the Gulf don’t help. And historically, the British and French states did their fair share of damage (and sectarian engineering) during the post-Ottoman carve-up.

None of these states protected people. And this is because they are states.

The young man who spoke up for Iran wasn’t a Shia Muslim. He was a Catholic, he said, who’d grown up in the Gulf. And he was also a leftist.

But this is something that leftists, when they were internationalists, once understood: states are designed to protect the property, position and privilege of the various elites which run them, not to safeguard the interests of ordinary people. This means Iran is not the protector of the Shia, Saudi Arabia is not the protector of the Sunnis, and Israel is not the protector of the Jews. Need it be said that the Assad regime is the deadliest enemy of Alawis?

https://qunfuz.com/2016/02/16/iran-the-protector/

The struggle for Kobane: an example of selective solidarity

Leila Al Shami (20.10.14)

The heroic resistance of the people of Kobane in fighting the onslaught of the Daesh (ISIS) fascists since mid-September, has led to a surge of international solidarity. A multitude of articles and statements have been written and protests have been held in cities across the world. Kurds have flooded across the Turkish border to help their compatriots in the fight despite being brutally pushed back by Turkish forces, and others including Turkish comrades from DAF (Revolutionary Anarchist Action) have gone to the border to support in keeping it open to help the flood of refugees escaping to Turkey. There have been calls to arm Kurdish forces and calls to support DAF and send aid for refugees. Yet this solidarity with Syria’s Kurds has not been extended to non-Kurdish groups in the country that have been fighting, and dying, to rid themselves of fascism and violent repression and for freedom and self-determination. It’s often said incorrectly, that sectarianism lies at the heart of the Syrian conflict. It’s necessary to understand to what extent sectarianism plays a role in our response too.

The protest movement that erupted against Bashar Al Assad in 2011 united people across Syria’s diverse ethnic and religious spectrum in a common struggle for freedom. Kobane was no exception. The Kurds who are the majority in the town had long suffered under the Arabization policies of the Baathist regime, and were amongst the first to rise up when the Syrian revolution began. In this protest from mid-2012 Kurds and Arabs in Kobane jointly call for the downfall of the regime and chant in support of the Free Syrian Army, raising the Kurdish flag at a time when this was a dangerous act of defiance. But from its earliest days the Syrian protest movement in Kobane and elsewhere failed to gain international support. Had it done so the country would not have been destroyed to such a degree that ISIS could have taken control of large areas.

Over the past three years, relations between Syria’s Arabs and Kurds have been fragile and changeable, subject to both the Assad regime’s manipulation of ethnic divisions, and to the misguided political machinations of opposition politicians from both groups who have put their own interests and agendas above the people’s vision of freedom. Yet, in spite of this activists on the ground have continued to stress the importance of Kurdish-Arab popular unity and to resist ethnic and sectarian divisions. Few international solidarity statements have mirrored these calls.

The absence of Sunni Arabs from narratives of the struggle against Daesh is notable. Few articles have mentioned that fighters from Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions are also risking their lives to join their Kurdish compatriots in defending Kobane from religious extremists or that recent weeks have seen greater coordination between Kurdish and Arab military formations. On 10 September 2014, local FSA brigades joined forces with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to create a joint operation to fight Daesh called Burkan Al Firat (Euphrates Volcano). The battalions involved include Liwa Thuwar Al Raqqa (Raqqa Revolutionary Brigade), Shams Al Shamal, Al-Tawhid (East), Saraya Jarablus and other smaller groups. This strategic alliance not only strengthens Kurdish-Arab unity at this critical time but also brings valuable experience to the Kobane resistance as the FSA has been fighting Daesh since the beginning of this year. In a 19 October statement the PYD affirmed that “This resistance shown by our units YPG and the factions of the free Syrian army is a guarantee for defeating ISIS terrorism in the region. Counter-terrorism and building a free and democratic Syria was the basis for the agreements signed with factions of the free Syrian Army. As we can see that the success of the revolution are subject to the development of this relationship between all factions and the forces of good in this country.” [sic]

Like their Kurdish compatriots, Free Syrian Army battalions have been resisting Daesh in Kobane with greatly inferior weapons. Whilst Daesh possesses the heavy US weaponry it seized in Iraq, Syrian fighters (both Kurds and Arabs) have only light arms and limited ammunition. Both the YPG and the FSA have been calling on the international community to supply them with heavy weaponry. Supporting the call for weapons to the resistance is imperative to allow the people of the region to defend themselves from annihilation. It also reduces the perceived need for direct military intervention from external powers which operate according to their own agendas, ones diametrically opposed to the interests of the popular struggle. In supporting such calls we should distinguish between 1) support for a broad coalition of local forces against fascism and for a popular struggle which seeks to destroy as much of the old regime as possible, as well as supporting the right of self-defense of *all* people against mass slaughter (including their right to take arms from wherever they are offered as necessity demands), and 2) support for any political project or group claiming power in the post-revolutionary phase which will necessarily reverse the achievements of the revolution. The later must be resisted.

Much of the international solidarity for the Kurdish struggle stems from support for Rojava’s inspiring social revolution. Kurdish majority areas of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane were able to establish the Autonomous Region following the withdrawal of Assad’s forces in July 2012. A Social Contract was developed which stresses the desire to “build a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs”. It affirms the principle of local self-government for all cantons of the region where governing councils and public institutions would be established through direct elections in a decentralized confederation. The charter enshrines unity and coexistence amongst the regions diverse ethnic and religious groups, a respect for human rights and an end to gender discrimination, and affirms people’s right to self determination. In a radical reorganization of society towards democratic confederalism the people of Rojava have established councils and communes throughout Western Kurdistan to self-manage their communities in areas such as health, education and trade and address the issues facing society. This provides a powerful example of alternative forms of social organization as a counterpoint to centralized, authoritarian control. Whilst such developments in radical democracy are a beacon of light in what’s fast becoming a region of darkness, anti-authoritarians should not romanticize the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Talking about the establishment of the Autonomous Region, Syrian-Kurdish anarchist Shiar Neyo states:

As I write, what survives of Syria’s democratic revolution is rapidly losing ground to an imperialist coalition of Russian planes and artillery, Iranian soldiers, Iranian-backed Shia jihadists from Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan, and local Assadist militias. Tragically, the PYD has joined this assault on Free Syria by invading and occupying Arab towns in northern Aleppo province. It is able to do so only as a result of the Russian carpet bombing which has driven much of the province’s remaining population north to the Turkish border.

These are not towns that Kurds were driven out of as part of regime Arabisation policies. This area always had an Arab majority, which is why the PYD never claimed it as a canton. But now the PYD is exploiting the changed balance of forces to capture this land and thereby link up the cantons into a territorially contiguous area around which to draw a border. It is clear now that it wants a state, not ‘democratic confederalism’, and it’s prepared to change demographics and ally with fascists to achieve its goal. In this it is applying the hard-nosed realpolitik that states and state-projects always apply. From an ethno-nation-state perspective, it’s very understandable. But it’s also criminal, and entirely counter-revolutionary.

PYD propaganda says it’s fighting Jabhat al-Nusra, but Nusra is scarce in in northern Aleppo, and the towns under assault are defended by local Free Army men. The current PYD action actually benefits jihadists in general, ISIS in particular, because the larger Russian plan is to encircle Aleppo city and the whole of Idlib province, to drive out the remaining civilians, to starve resisters into submission, and to utterly destroy the councils and the democratic-nationalist militias. Because foreign powers are clearing and occupying Syria, the conflict is morphing again, this time into a national liberation war. Surely it would be better for Kurds and everyone else if the democrats survive to participate in this struggle. Otherwise it will be led be jihadists.

When the Russian and Iranian states are finally repulsed, Arabs, Turks and Kurds will still inhabit the land. Syrian Kurds have an undoubted right to self-determination, to decide their own destiny. Syrian Arabs do too. They’ve been fighting for it for five years and they will continue to fight, however hard the terrain.

So the PYD’s gamble is likely to backfire. Its current approach is criminally stupid, and for that many must bear the blame. Certainly the ‘official’ opposition could have done much more early on to assure Kurds of their right to autonomy, at least to remove the ‘Arab’ from ‘Syrian Arab Republic’. Too many, particularly those of the older generation who adhere to traditional political models, continue to worship the notion of a strongly centralised (and Arabist) state. But still the Kurdish National Council, repressed in Rojava, is incorporated into the Syrian opposition’s Coalition, and a Kurd, Abdel Baset Sida, once led the Syrian National Council. There are plenty of Kurds in the Free Army as well as in the Islamist battalions. All over the country Kurds work alongside Arabs in civil activism.

It’s a grave mistake to equate the PYD with the Syrian Kurds in general, who are a people as diverse in opinion as any other. Even ISIS boasts a large Kurdish contingent. The leader of the attack on Kobani was a Kurd.

The hope lies with those Syrian revolutionaries, Arab, Kurd, Turkmen, Syriac, who stand and fight in mutual solidarity.

https://qunfuz.com/2016/02/22/democratic-confederalism-or-counter-revolution/

‘Iran the Protector’

Robin Yassin-Kassab (16.2.16)

I recently gave a talk in a radical bookshop in Scotland. The talk was about my and Leila al-Shami’s “Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War”, a book which aims to amplify grassroots Syrian revolutionary voices and perspectives. My talk was of course critical of the Iranian and Russian interventions to rescue the Assad regime.

During the question and answer session afterwards, a young man declared: “You’ve spoken against Iran. You’ve made a good case. But the fact remains, Iran is the protector of Shia Muslims throughout the region.”

In reply I asked him to consider the Syrian town of al-Qusayr at two different moments: summer 2006 and summer 2013.

During the July 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese fled south Lebanon and south Beirut – the Hizbullah heartlands where Israeli strikes were fiercest – and sought refuge inside Syria. Syrians welcomed them into their homes, schools and mosques. Several thousand were sheltered in Qusayr, a Sunni agricultural town between Homs and the Lebanese border.

It made no difference that most of these refugees were Shia Muslims. They were just Muslims, and Arabs, and they were paying the price of a resistance war against Israeli occupation and assault. That’s how they were seen.

Their political leadership was also widely admired. The kind of people who would resist the pressure to pin up posters of Hafez or Bashaar al-Assad might still raise Hassan Nasrallah’s picture. During the 2006 war, very many Syrians of all backgrounds donated money to the refugees and to Hizbullah itself. The famous actress Mai Skaf was one such benefactor.

How quickly things changed. By 2012 Mai Skaf was embroiled in an online war with Hizbullah. “I collected 100,000 liras for our Lebanese brethren who fled the July 2006 war to Syria,” she posted on Facebook, “bought them TV sets and satellite dishes to follow what was happening in their countries, and bought their children shoes and pajamas. Now I am telling Hassan Nasrallah that I regret doing that and I want him to either withdraw his thugs from Syria or give me back my money.”

Which brings us to the second moment for comparison: summer 2013. Throughout May, hundreds of Hizbullah fighters led a devastating assault on Qusayr. Because they were local men defending their homes, the Free Syrian Army were able to resist the onslaught for weeks, but were finally defeated. A Shia flag was then hung over the town’s main Sunni mosque, a signal of sectarian conquest. Shortly afterwards the regime burnt the Homs Land Registry, and Alawi and Shia families were invited to occupy homes abandoned by the families of Qusayr.

So a militia designed to resist foreign occupation became an occupier itself. The supposed assistant of the oppressed became the fighting arm of the oppressor. In Shia symbology, Hizbullah, rather than defending Hussain, was serving Yazeed.

The backlash hit fast. Qusayr fell on June 5th. On June 11th 60 Shia, most civilians, were massacred at Hatla in Deir al-Zor.

Why did Hizbullah intervene against the Syrian revolution? Various excuses were offered up: to protect the Lebanese borders, or to protect the shrine of the Prophet’s granddaughter Zainab outside Damascus. None of them explained Hizbullah’s participation in battles as far afield as Hama or Aleppo. Why would Nasrallah choose to infuriate Lebanese Sunnis, to make Lebanese Shia targets of sectarian revenge attacks, to deplete and downgrade his anti-Zionist fighting force?

From a Lebanese perspective, it makes no sense. And as a community, the Lebanese Shia could have taken a very different line. In 2012, for instance, the respected Shia leader Sayyed Hani Fahs called on Lebanese Shia to “support the Arab uprisings... particularly the Syrian [one] which will triumph, God willing... Among the [factors] that guarantee a [good] future for us in Lebanon is for Syria to be stable, free, and ruled by a democratic, pluralist and modern state.”

But still Hizbullah steered its constituency away from revolutionary solidarity and into a deadly embrace with the Assad regime. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, who led Hizbullah between 1989 and 1991, blamed Iran: “I was secretary general of the party,” he said, “and I know that the decision is Iranian, and the alternative would have been a confrontation with the Iranians. I know that the Lebanese in Hizbullah, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah more than anyone, are not convinced about this war. ... Iran and Hizbullah bear responsibility for every Syrian killed, every tree felled, and every house destroyed.”

Iranian counter-revolutionary policy not only uses Arab Shia as cannon fodder, but bears huge responsibilty too for the anti-Shia backlash on the Syrian

individuals, including assassinations and kidnappings. The SNA then announced a military offensive, supported by the Turkish army on the city of Manbij, home to 100,000 civilians, and controlled by the SDF.

There are, therefore, differences between HTS and SNA. The HTS has a relative autonomy from Turkey in contrast to the SNA, which is controlled by Turkey and serves its interests. The two forces are different, pursue distinct goals, and have conflicts between them, although for the moment these have been kept under wraps. For instance, HTS is currently not seeking to confront the SDF. In addition to this, the SNA published a critical statement against HTS for their “aggressive behavior” against SNA members, while HTS reportedly blamed SNA fighters for looting.

For many who have not been paying attention to Syria, this came out of the blue. What are the roots of this situation in Syria’s revolution, counter-revolution, and civil war? What has happened inside the country over the recent period that triggered the military offensive? What are the regional and international dynamics that opened space for the rebel advances?

JD: Initially, HTS launched the military campaign as a reaction to the escalation of attacks and bombing of its northwestern territory by Assad’s regime and Russia. It also aimed to recapture areas that the regime had conquered, violating the de-escalation zones agreed upon in a March 2020 deal, negotiated by Moscow and Tehran. With their surprising success, however, they expanded their ambitions and openly called for the overthrow of the regime, which they and others have now accomplished.

The HTS and SNA have been so successful because of the weakening of the regime’s main allies. Russia, Assad’s key international sponsor, has diverted its forces and resources to its imperialist war against Ukraine. As a result, its involvement in Syria has been significantly more limited than in similar military operations in previous years.

Its other two key allies, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iran, have been dramatically weakened by Israel since October 7, 2023. Tel Aviv has carried out assassinations of Hezbollah’s leadership, including Hassan Nasrallah, decimated its cadre with the pager attacks, and bombed its forces in Lebanon. Hezbollah is definitely facing its greatest challenge since its foundation. Israel has also launched waves of strikes against Iran, exposing its vulnerabilities. It has also increased bombing of Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria in the past few months.

With its main backers preoccupied and weakened, Assad’s dictatorship was in a vulnerable position. Because of all its structural weaknesses, lack of support from the population it rules, unreliability of its own troops, and without international and regional support, it proved unable to withstand the rebel forces advances and in city after city and its rule over them has collapsed like a house of cards.

How had the regime’s allies initially responded? What are their interests in Syria?

JD: Both Russia and Iran initially pledged to support the regime and also pressured it to fight the HTS and SNA. In the first days of the offensive, Russia called on the Syrian regime to pull itself together and “put order in Aleppo,” which seems to indicate that it was hoping for Damascus to counter-attack.

Iran called for “coordination” with Moscow in the face of this offensive. It has claimed that the U.S. and Israel are behind the rebel’s offensive against the Syrian regime’s attempt to destabilize it and divert attention from Israel’s war in Palestine and Lebanon. Iranian officials declared their full support for the Syrian regime and confirmed their intentions to maintain and even increase the presence of their “military advisers” in Syria to support its army. Teheran also promised to provide missiles and drones to the Syrian regime and even deploy its own troops.

But this clearly did not work. Despite Russian bombing of areas outside of the control of the regime, the rebels’ advance was undeterred.

Both powers have a lot to lose in Syria. For Iran, Syria is crucial for the transfer of weapons to, and logistic coordination with, Hezbollah. It was actually rumoured before the fall of the regime that the Lebanese party has sent a small number of “supervisory forces” to Homs in order to assist regime’s military forces and 2000 soldiers in the city of Qusayr, one of its strongholds in

Syria near the border with Lebanon, to defend it in the event of an attack by the rebels. As the regime was falling, it withdrew its forces.

On its side, Russia’s Hmeimim airbase in Syria’s Latakia province, and its naval facility at Tartous on the coast, have been important sites for Russia to assert its geopolitical clout in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa. Loss of these bases would undermine Russia’s status as its intervention in Syria has been used as an example of how it can use military force to shape events outside of its borders and compete with western states.

What role have other regional and imperial powers, particularly Turkey, Israel, and the U.S. played in this scenario? What are their ambitions in the situation?

JD: Despite Turkey’s normalization with Syria, Ankara has grown frustrated with Damascus. So, it encouraged, or at least gave the green light to, the military offensive and assisted it one way or another. Ankara’s objective was initially to improve its position in future negotiations with the Syrian regime, but also with Iran and Russia.

Now with the fall of the regime, Turkey’s influence is even more important in Syria and probably makes it the key regional actor in the country. Ankara is also seeking to use the SNA to weaken the SDF, which is dominated by the armed wing of the Kurdish party PYD, a sister organization of Turkey’s Kurdish party PKK, which is designated as terrorist by Ankara, the U.S., and the E.U..

Turkey has two other main objectives. First, they aim to carry out the forced return of Syrian refugees in Turkey back to Syria. Second, they want to deny Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and more specifically undermine the Kurdish-led administration in northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, also called Rojava), which would set a precedent for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey, a threat to the regime as it is currently constituted.

Neither the U.S.nor Israel had a hand in these events. In fact, the opposite is the case. The U.S. were worried that the overthrow of the regime could create more instability in the region. U.S. officials initially declared that the “Assad regime’s ongoing refusal to engage in the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254, and its reliance on Russia and Iran, created the conditions now unfolding, including the collapse of Assad regime lines in northwest Syria.”

It also declared that it had “nothing to do with this offensive, which is led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist organization.” Following a visit to Turkey, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for de-escalation in Syria. After the fall of the regime, U.S. officials declared that they will maintain their presence in eastern Syria, around 900 soldiers, and will take measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State.

For their part, Israeli officials declared that the “collapse of the Assad regime would likely create chaos in which military threats against Israel would develop.” Moreover, Israel has never really supported the overthrow of the Syrian regime all the way back to the attempted revolution in 2011. In July 2018 Netanyahu did not object to Assad taking back control of the country and stabilizing his power.

Netanyahu said Israel would only act against perceived threats, such as Iran and Hezbollah’s forces and influence, explaining, “We haven’t had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights.” A few hours after the announcement of the fall of the regime, the Israeli occupation army took control of the Syrian side of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights in order to prevent rebels from taking it over the area on Sunday. Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had ordered the Israeli occupation army to “take control” of the Golan buffer zone and “adjacent strategic positions.”

Many campists have come to the defense of Assad yet again, this time contending that a defeat for Assad would be a setback for the Palestinian liberation struggle. What do you make of that argument? What will it mean for Palestine?

JD: Yes, campists have argued that this military offensive is led by “Al-Qaeda and other terrorists” and that it is a western-imperialist plot against the Syrian regime intended to weaken the so-called “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran and Hezbollah. Since this Axis claims to be in support of the Palestinians, the

campists claim that the fall of Assad weakens it and therefore undermines the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

Alongside ignoring any agency to local Syrian actors, the main problem with the argument promoted by the supporters of the so-called “Axis of Resistance” is their assumption that the liberation of Palestine will come from above, from these states or other forces, regardless of their reactionary and authoritarian nature, and their neoliberal economic policies. That strategy has failed in the past and will do so again today. In fact, rather than advancing the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, the Middle East’s authoritarian and despotic states, whether aligned with the West or opposed to it, have repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians and even repressed them.

Moreover, the campists ignore the fact that Iran and Syria’s main objectives are not the liberation of Palestine but preservation of their states and their economic and geopolitical interests. They will put those before Palestine every single time. Syria, in particular, as Netanyahu has made abundantly clear in the quote I just cited, has not lifted a finger against Israel for decades.

For its part, Iran has rhetorically supported the Palestinian cause and funded Hamas. But since October 7, 2023, its main goal has been to improve its standing in the region so as to be in the best position for future political and economic negotiations with the U.S. Iran wishes to guarantee its political and security interests and therefore has been keen to avoid any direct war with Israel.

Its main geopolitical objective in relation to the Palestinians is not to liberate them, but to use them as leverage, particularly in its relations with the United States. Similarly, Iran’s passive response to Israel’s assassination of Nasrallah, decimation of Hezbollah’s cadres, and its brutal war against Lebanon demonstrate that its first priority is protecting itself and its interests. It was not willing to sacrifice these and come to the defense of its key non-state ally.

Similarly, Iran has proved itself, as at best, a fickle ally of Hamas. It has reduced its funding for Hamas when their interests did not coincide. It cut its financial assistance to Hamas after the Syrian Revolution in 2011, when the Palestinian movement refused to support the Syrian regime’s murderous repression of Syrian protesters.

In the case of the Syrian regime, the argument against their supposed support for Palestine is airtight. It has not come to the defense of Palestine over the last year of Israel’s genocidal war. Despite Israel’s bombardment of Syria, before and after October 7, the regime has not responded. This is in line with the regime’s policy since 1974 of trying to avoid any significant and direct confrontation with Israel.

On top of that the regime has repeatedly repressed Palestinians in Syria, including the killing of several thousands of them since 2011, laying waste to the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus. They have also attacked the Palestinian national movement itself. For example, in 1976 Hafez al-Assad, father of his heir and just-deposed dictator Bashar al-Assad, intervened in Lebanon and supported far-right Lebanese parties against left-wing Palestinian and Lebanese organizations.

It also carried out military operations against Palestinian camps in Beirut in 1985 and 1986. In 1990 approximately 2,500 Palestinian political prisoners were detained in Syrian prisons.

Given this history, it is a mistake for the Palestine solidarity movement to defend and align itself with imperialist or sub-imperialist states that put their interests before solidarity with Palestine, compete for geopolitical gain, and exploit their countries’ workers and resources. Of course, U.S. imperialism remains the region’s main enemy with its exceptional history of war, plunder, and political domination.

„But it makes no sense to look reactionary regional powers and other imperialist states like Russia or China as allies of Palestine or its solidarity movement. There is simply no evidence to substantiate that position. To choose one imperialism over another is to guarantee the stability of the capitalist system and the exploitation of popular classes.

Similarly, to support authoritarian and despotic regimes in pursuit of the objective of liberating Palestine is not only morally wrong but also has proved itself a failed strategy.“

Instead, the Palestinian solidarity movement must see the liberation of Palestine as bound up not with the region’s states but with the liberation of its popular classes. These identify with Palestine and see their own battles for democracy and equality as intimately tied to the Palestinian’s struggle for liberation. When Palestinians fight, it tends to trigger the regional movement for liberation, and the regional movement feeds back into the one in occupied Palestine.

These struggles are dialectically connected; they are mutual struggles for collective liberation. Far-right Israeli minister Avigdor Lieberman recognized the danger that regional popular uprisings posed to Israel in 2011 when he said that the Egyptian revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak and opened the door to a period of democratic opening in the country was a greater threat to Israel than Iran.

This is not to deny the right of resistance of Palestinians and Lebanese to Israel’s brutal wars, but to understand that the united revolt of Palestinian and regional’s popular classes alone have the power to transform the entire Middle East and North Africa, toppling authoritarian regimes, expelling the U.S. and other imperialist powers. International anti-imperialist solidarity with Palestine and the region’s popular classes is essential, because they face not just Israel and the MENA’s reactionary regimes, but also their imperialist backers.

The main task of the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly in the West, is to denounce the complicit role of our ruling classes in supporting not only the racist settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel and its genocidal war against the Palestinians, but also Israel’s attacks on other countries in the region such as Lebanon. The movement must pressure those ruling classes to break off any political, economic, and military relations with Tel Aviv.

In that way, the solidarity movement can challenge and weaken international and regional support for Israel, opening the space for Palestinians to free themselves along with the popular classes in the region.

Will the rebels advance in Syria open space for progressive forces to renew the revolutionary struggle and provide an alternative to both the regime and Islamic fundamentalism?

JD: There are no obvious answers except more questions. Will struggle from below and self-organization be possible in the areas in which the regime has been expelled? Will civil society’s organizations (not narrowly defined as NGOs but in a Gramscian sense of popular mass formations outside of the state) and alternative political structures with democratic and progressive politics be able to establish themselves, organize, and constitute a political and social alternative to HTS and SNA? Will the stretching of HTS and SNA forces allow space to organize locally?

These are the key questions, in my opinion, without clear answers. Looking at HTS and SNA’s policies in the past, they have not encouraged a democratic space to develop, but quite the opposite. They have been authoritarian. No trust should be accorded to such forces. Only the self-organization of popular classes fighting for democratic and progressive demands will create that space and open a path toward actual liberation. This will depend on overcoming many obstacles from war fatigue to repression, poverty, and social dislocation.

„The main obstacle has been, is, and will be the authoritarian actors, previously the regime, but now many of the opposition forces, especially the HTS and SNA; their rule and the military clashes between them have suffocated the space for democratic and progressive forces to democratically determine their future. Even in the spaces freed from regime control we have yet to see popular

There’s an inability to distinguish between armed groups and the civil resistance; between armed groups which have a democratic basis or are simply engaged in self-defense of their communities and those which have an authoritarian agenda; between those who seek to dissolve traditional power structures and those who only seek power for themselves.

The revolution faces many challenges, and no one should be fooled into thinking that a free society will be the result. States and the counter revolution are much stronger than we are. Yet in face of such challenges, anarchists should stand with the exploited and oppressed, with those who are creating new ways of organizing in the most difficult of circumstances and those who are currently facing annihilation.

Practical solidarity will be more fruitful than misinformed theoretical hectoring.

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/396-summer-2016/challenging-the-nation-state-in-syria/>

‘Democratic Confederalism’ or Counter-Revolution?

Robin Yassin-Kassab (22.2.16)

The first fact is this: the Kurds have suffered a terrible historical injustice. The Arabs were rightly enraged when Britain and France carved bilad al-Sham (the Levant) into mini-states, then gave one of them to Zionism. But the post-Ottoman dispensation allowed the Kurds no state at all – and this in an age when the Middle East was ill with nationalist fever. Everywhere the Kurds became minorities in hyper-nationalist states.

Over the years an estimated 40,000 people have been killed in Turkish-Kurdish fighting, most of them Kurds. In the late 1980s, Saddam Hussain’s genocidal Anfal campaign murdered somewhere between 50 and 200,000 Iraqi Kurds. In Syria, where Kurds formed about 10% of the population, or around two million people, it was illegal to teach in Kurdish. Approximately 300,000 Kurds (by 2011) were denied citizenship by the state, and were therefore excluded from education and health care, barred from owning land or setting up businesses.

While oppressing Kurds at home, President Hafez al-Assad (Bashaar’s father) cultivated good relations with Kurdish groups abroad. This fitted into his regional strategy of backing spoilers and irritants as pawns against his rivals.

For almost two decades Assad provided refuge to Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the Turkish-Kurdish organisation the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK. Assad permitted the PKK to use parts of Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley (then under Syrian regime control) to build military training camps as well as heroin laboratories (a venture of great mutual benefit).

In October 1998, under Turkish pressure, Ocalan was made to leave Syria. He fled through several countries until Turkish agents captured him in Kenya. But much of his Syrian infrastructure remained. Later it would be revamped as the Democratic Union Party, or PYD. The PYD taught its followers to focus on the fight in Turkey, not Syria. Instead of organising a struggle for Kurdish civil and national rights at home, the PYD sent nationalist young men to join the insurgency across the border.

The party (and others too) played a confusing role during the 2004 Syrian Kurdish intifada. On the one hand, many PYD-affiliated Kurds were arrested and abused, and some detained for years, for their anti-regime activities; on the other, Kurds sometimes reported that the PYD assisted the regime in suppressing the uprising.

When the 2011 protest movement erupted, Kurds formed a key component. Arab Syrians showed their appreciation by chanting ‘Azadi’ – the Kurdish word for freedom. The revolutionary leader Meshaal Temmo, supporting resistance to the regime and self-determination for all, described the Kurds as “an inseparable part of the Syrian people”. The regime assassinated him in October 2011.

The PYD, meanwhile, repressed Kurds who protested against Assad. Interviewed for our book “Burning Country”, activist and aid worker Serdar

Ahmad complained, “it was the PYD which stopped our [2004] Kurdish revolution, just as in 2011 it was the PYD that acted as Assad’s *shabeeha* in the Kurdish areas, beating protestors with sticks.”

In July 2012, hard-pressed against the developing Free Army challenge, the Assad regime made an orderly withdrawal from Kurdish-majority areas, handing over security installations to the PYD. A transfer of authority, therefore, rather than a liberation.

Abdullah Ocalan, meanwhile, imprisoned on an island in the Marmara Sea, had been reading the American anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin, and radically changing his rhetoric as a result. He no longer aimed for a unified Marxist-Leninist state, but for borderless, self-organised communities that would render the state irrelevant. “The democratic confederalism of Kurdistan is not a State system,” he wrote. “It is the democratic system of a people without a State.” The theory seemed particularly applicable to Syria, where the Kurdish-majority areas are not territorially contiguous.

In theory, and to an extent in practice, the PYD implemented ‘democratic confederalism’ in the three Kurdish cantons in Syria – Jazira, Kobani and Afréen – collectively known as Rojava. The cantons were governed democratically by local and regional councils. It was an undoubted victory on a Kurdish national level too (for instance, Kurdish children could now attend Kurdish-language schools). It also seemed to betoken a brighter future for Kurdish women. After all, the Women’s Protection Units, or YPJ, compose 40% of the PYD’s troops.

All in all, the PYD was a great improvement on Baathist dictatorship. And not surprisingly, the radical and democratic nature of the Rojava project won significant support from Western leftists. It’s a pity that no such support was shown for the self-organised, democratically-selected revolutionary councils in Arab areas, although the Arab towns were under relentless attack from land and sky. (Until the ISIS attack on Kobani, the Kurdish cantons were spared bombardment). In most cases, Western leftists remain blissfully unaware that the councils even exist in Arab-majority neighbourhoods. They see only Islamist extremists – who are present in large part as a result of the bombardment. Ideological blinkers and journalistic failures must be equally blamed for Western ignorance of these Syrian democrats.

The current tendency to romanticise the PYD also ignores the rapidly expanding gap between the party’s rhetoric and the reality on the ground. In practice, PYD directives supercede council decisions. Free radio stations are closed, alternative political parties banned, dissenters repressed. The PYD enforces a monopoly on aid and money entering Rojava, and its People’s Protection Units, or YPG, monopolise the weapons. A large proportion of YPG fighters are Turkish, not Syrian Kurds. Compulsory military conscription has driven many Syrian Kurdish men into refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

When we interviewed Noor Bakeer, a teacher from Afréen, he told us, “nothing much changed when the regime withdrew from Afréen and the PYD took over. The terror and repression continued as the PYD imposed themselves by force. They stopped other political parties from operating and tried to rule alone. PYD double standards and the fact they collaborated with the regime made [Arab] opposition forces consider Afréen an enemy of the revolution. This led to their punitive actions against Afréen, such as imposing an unjust siege on the city which doubled the citizens’ suffering.”

So there was bad blood from the start. Arabs, Turkmen, and some Kurds considered the PYD to be collaborators with Assad. Relations deteriorated further with the rise of Islamist extremists in the armed rebellion. Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra skirmished with the PYD. The violence culminated in ISIS’s terrible assault on Kobani. In the end, PYD-forces assisted by small Free Army contingents expelled ISIS all along the border from Kobani to Jazira. And so they linked up those cantons, through Arab-majority land.

In the context of the anti-ISIS struggle, the PYD entered into military alliances with both Russia and America. Blame should not be cast automatically on people seeking help, for reasons of survival, from anywhere they may find it. It’s notable, though, that the same ‘anti-imperialists’ who write off Syrian revolutionaries (if they receive an American ready-meal or a pair of night-vision goggles) as CIA-agents, emit scarcely a squeak of criticism against the PYD’s pragmatism.

He argued that it is inconsistent for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to living within the hierarchical and authoritarian structures imposed by the state. Aziz believed that revolutionary activity should permeate all aspects of life and advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization.

He called for autonomous, non-hierarchical organization and self-governance, based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid. He envisaged the councils as being horizontally organized grassroots forums through which people could work together to achieve three primary goals: to manage their lives independently of the state; collaborate collectively; and initiate a social revolution, locally, regionally and nationally.

Together with comrades, Aziz helped establish the first local council in Zabadani, followed by others in the Syrian cities of Barzeh, Daraya and Douma.

Tragically, Aziz was arrested in November 2012 by Assad regime intelligence agents and held in the infamous Adra prison where he died three months later. Shortly before his death he declared, “We are no less than the Paris Commune workers—they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half.”

Hundreds of local councils have spread throughout Syria, bringing power down to the community level. These are civil administrative structures, and most have selected their members through democratic elections or popular consensus—something unheard of under Assad totalitarianism. Some hold elections every 3-6 months to recall representatives who are not performing well and decisions on issues are taken by majority vote.

They comprise revolutionary activists, professionals and representatives of large families or tribes. In most cases, they retain their independence from political and military factions, and in mixed communities such as in Yabroud, Selemmih and Manbij, local councils included representatives of different ethnic and religious groups.

In the absence of the state, it’s the local councils which continue to provide water, education and healthcare to local communities. They’ve set up alternative sources of energy, such as solar power, and grow food to fight off starvation in communities under siege.

Various council-affiliated committees take responsibility for media work, civil defense, and distribution of humanitarian aid. Local councils at the village and neighbourhood level are sometimes connected to larger provincial councils. They elect presidents and co-presidents and contain numerous departments such as media, relief, health, security, legal and civil services.

These experiments in self-organization are caught in a complex web of challenges. The liberated areas have been the main target of Assadist (and more recently Russian) airstrikes, in an attempt to crush any alternative to the regime.

The relentless assault has contributed to the depopulation of these areas and sent waves of refugees seeking safety abroad. Militarization of the uprising, which was on the rise in the summer/fall of 2011, transformed it from a horizontally organized, inclusive and non-sectarian movement into a struggle amongst numerous competing authoritarian factions attempting to assert their hegemony and deny liberated communities self-determination.

The clearest examples are some of the more extreme Islamist factions which have tried to wrest control away from the local councils and impose their own parallel structures, such as Shura Councils and Sharia courts, despite popular protest in areas where this has occurred.

These groups remain part of the armed anti-Assad struggle (and now, with the military involvement of imperialist powers, part of the struggle against foreign occupation) as well as the fight against Daesh (ISIS). But they’ve never been part of the Syrian people’s struggle for freedom, social justice, and self-determination. They seek to replace one authoritarian state with another.

The provincial-level councils are often linked to the Syrian National Coalition (the opposition in exile), which in turn is influenced by the agendas of foreign powers, primarily the West and reactionary Gulf states. Subject to politicized funding, their grassroots democracy is compromised. Other challenges exist on the societal level.

Syrian society is highly patriarchal—through the family, the tribe, and the nation state. Few women are local council members, despite the prominent role of women in such revolutionary groupings and civil society organizations

as the Local Coordination Committees, or the numerous women’s centres in liberated areas. These support women’s activism and their involvement in the political, economic, and social spheres as a means of challenging traditional patriarchal structures.

In the Kurdish regions of the north, the social revolution has been much more inclusive of women. Three non-contiguous Kurdish cantons (Jazira, Kobane and Afrin) declared democratic autonomy in January 2014, each establishing a parliament (chosen by appointment), various ministries and courts.

Together the three cantons comprise Rojava, which is largely led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD has been heavily influenced by the ideas of imprisoned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who in turn was influenced by American anarchist Murray Bookchin and espouses the idea of democratic confederalism.

Based on the principles of direct democracy, gender equality and ecology, this idea directly challenges the notion of the nation state, instead calling for regional autonomy and promoting self-organization and self-governance.

Throughout Rojava the communes are the forum through which people come together to find solutions for their needs and the challenges they face. Each commune has various committees attached to it to deal with issues such as education, justice, food supply, ecological issues and self-defense. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus.

The communes are linked to district councils made up of commune representatives and political parties and (like the communes) have a 40 percent quota for women. These are then linked to the canton administration through various mechanisms which coordinate between the councils and the regional government of Rojava.

Unlike other areas of Syria, Rojava has largely been spared the scorched earth policies of Assad and his allies, allowing these liberated areas greater opportunity to develop and flourish.

Yet they also face a number of challenges. Despite its libertarian rhetoric, the PYD, which dominates the Self Administration, is an authoritarian party which has silenced, arrested, imprisoned, and assassinated other Kurdish opposition groups and members.

The People’s Defense Units (YPG), dominated by the PYD, and the American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (dominated by the YPG) have recently been carrying out offensives into Arab majority areas under cover of Russian air-strikes. This looks like an attempt to link up the cantons in a state building project which goes against the idea of democratic confederalism and risks Kurdish-Arab inter-ethnic conflict.

The Kurds themselves face repeated assaults by the authoritarian Turkish state which aims to crush Kurdish aspirations to self-determination both in its own borders and within Syria. They also face assaults by extremist Islamist groups, primarily Daesh, the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Al Nusra, and Ahrar Al Sham.

Throughout Syria, oppressive and hierarchical structures and institutions have been broken down and people are freely organizing and self-managing their communities. Nowhere has there been a greater challenge to the concept of the nation state since the Spanish Revolution and Civil War in the late 1930s.

But as shown above, these experiments in community autonomy are under increasing threat from many quarters. Due to the strength of the counter-revolution, what may occur with the collapse of the Syrian state, is the imposition of yet more mini-states, fortified by guns, razor-wire fences and sectarian rhetoric, creating further divisions and a state of perpetual war.

Solidarity with Syrians in their struggle is vital. Yet at times, many groups that identify as being part of ‘the left’ have not only failed to stand in solidarity with revolutionary Syrians, but have given savage support for counter-revolution. This often stems from ignorance about Syria’s context, generalizing Orientalism and rising Islamophobia.

Many have failed to see or understand the huge diversity of actors who are engaged in struggle at the current time, actors who sometimes share similar aims (such as the overthrow of the regime), but have very different end goals.

campaigns of democratic and progressive resistance. And, where the SNA has conquered Kurdish areas, it violated Kurd’s rights, repressed them with violence, and forcefully displaced large numbers of them.“

We have to face the hard fact that there is a glaring absence of an independent democratic and progressive bloc that is able to organize and clearly oppose the Syrian regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces. Building this bloc will take time. It will have to combine struggles against autocracy, exploitation, and all forms of oppression. It will need to raise demands for democracy, equality, Kurdish self-determination, and women’s liberation in order to build solidarity among the country’s exploited and oppressed.

To advance such demands, that progressive bloc will have to build and rebuild popular organizations from unions to feminist organizations, community organizations, and national structures to bring them together. That will require collaboration between democratic and progressive actors throughout society.

This said, there is hope, while the key dynamics was initially military and led by HTS and SNA, in the past few days, we saw growing popular demonstrations and people coming out in the streets throughout the country. They are not following any orders of HTS, SNA or any other armed opposition groups. There is a space now, with its contradictions and challenges as mentioned above, for Syrians to try to rebuild civilian popular resistance from below and alternative structures of power.

In addition to this, one of the key tasks will be to tackle the country’s central ethnic division, the one between Arab and Kurds. Progressive forces must wage a clear struggle against Arab chauvinism to overcome this division and forge solidarity between these populations. This has been a challenge from the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and will have to be confronted and resolved in a progressive manner in order for the country’s people to be truly liberated.

There is a desperate need to return to the original aspirations of the Syrian Revolution for democracy, social justice and equality—and in a fashion that upholds Kurdish self-determination. While the Kurdish PYD can be criticized for its mistakes and form of rule, it is not the main obstacle to such solidarity between Kurds and Arabs. That has been the belligerent and chauvinist positions and policies of Arab opposition forces in Syria—beginning with the Arab-dominated Syrian National Coalition followed by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the main opposition bodies in exile supported by the West and regional countries, that tried to lead the Syrian Revolution in its early years—and today those of the two key military forces, the HTS and SNA.

In this context, progressive forces must pursue collaboration between Syrian Arabs and Kurds, including the AANES. The AANES project and its political institutions represent large sections of the Kurdish population and have protected it against various local and external threats.

That said, it too has faults and must not be supported uncritically. The PYD and AANES have used force and repression against political activists and groups challenging its power. And it has also violated the human rights of civilians. Nonetheless, it has scored some important achievements, in particular its increase of women’s participation in all levels in society, as well as the codification of secular laws and a greater inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities. However, on socio-economic issues, it has not broken with capitalism and has not adequately addressed the grievances of the popular classes.

Whatever criticisms progressives may have of the PYD and the AANES, we must reject and oppose Arab chauvinist descriptions of it as “the devil” and a “separatist” ethno-nationalist project. But in rejecting such bigotry, we must not uncritically romanticize the AANES, as some western anarchists and leftists have done, misrepresenting it as a new form of democratic power from below.

There has already been some collaboration between Syrian Arab democrats and progressives and AANES and institutions connected to it, and that must be built on and expanded. But, as in any kind of collaboration, this should not be done uncritically.

While it is important to remind everyone that Bashar al-Assad’s regime and its allies are the first responsible for the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians, mass destructions, deepening impoverishment and the current situation in Syria, the objective of the Syrian revolution goes beyond what HTS leader, al-Jolani, said in his interview with CNN. It is not only to overthrow this regime, but to build a society characterized by democracy, equality, and full rights for oppressed groups. Otherwise, we are only replacing one evil with another.

What impact will the fall of the regime have on the region and the imperial powers? What position should the international Left take in this situation?

JD: Following the fall of the regime, HTS leader al-Jolani, stated that Syrian state institutions will be supervised by former regime’s Prime Minister Mohammed Jalali until they are handed over to a new government with full executive powers, following elections, signalling efforts to secure an orderly transition. Syrian telecommunications minister Eyad al-Khatib agreed to collaborate with HTS’s representatives to ensure that telecoms and the internet would continue to function.

These are clear indications that HTS wants to carry out a controlled transition of power in order to appease foreign fears, establish contacts with regional and international powers, and win recognition as a legitimate force that can be negotiated with. An obstacle to such normalization is the fact that HTS is still considered as a terrorist organisation, while Syria is under sanctions.

A period of instability is nevertheless to be expected in the country. In Damascus, on the day after the fall of the regime, some chaos in the streets could be seen, the central bank was for example looted.

It is still hard to tell what impact the regime’s fall will have on the regional and imperial powers. For the U.S. and western states, the main objective is now damage control to prevent chaos extending into the region. Regional states are clearly not satisfied with the current situation, as they had entered a normalization process with the regime in the past few years. Regarding Turkey, its main objective will be to consolidate its power and influence in Syria and get rid of the Kurdish-led AANES in the northeast. Turkey’s top diplomat actually said on Sunday that the Turkish state was in contact with rebels in Syria to ensure that the Islamic State and specifically the “PKK” do not take advantage of the fall of the Damascus regime to extend their influence. And an additional impact to take into consideration is the weakening of Iran’s regional influence and therefore of Hezbollah’s in Lebanon.

„The different powers have, however, a common objective: to impose a form of authoritarian stability in Syria and the region. That, of course, does not mean unity between the regional and imperial powers. They each have their own, and often antagonistic, interests, but they do not want the destabilization of the Middle East and North Africa, especially any kind of instability that would disrupt the flow of oil to global capitalism.“

The international Left must not side with the remnants of the regime or the local, regional and international forces of counter-revolution. Instead, the political compass of revolutionaries should be the principle of solidarity with popular and progressive struggles from below. This means supporting groups and individuals organizing and fighting for a progressive and inclusive Syria and building solidarity between them and the region’s popular classes.

Amidst a volatile moment in Syria, the Middle East, and North Africa we must avoid the twin traps of romanticization and defeatism. Instead, we must pursue a strategy of critical, progressive, international solidarity among popular forces in the region and throughout the world. This is the Left’s crucial task and responsibility, especially in these very complex times.

Left analyses of imperialism must stand against ‘campism’

Syria and Israel may be in different geopolitical camps but their practices of population extermination are the same. The international left must recognise the commonalities, argues Elia J Ayoub (25.8.24)

The ongoing Israeli genocide against the Palestinian people has provided an appalling reminder of the importance of critically studying the nature of imperialist practices in the 21st century. As a starting point we should recognise that the world we live in today has been shaped by the successful overthrow of empires. The success of anti-imperialist movements has seen human rights, including the rights to self-government and the sovereign equality of all states, progressively incorporated into the global order under the auspices of the United Nations.

The nature of imperial discourses and practices has adapted to this new reality where rights and freedoms have been formally institutionalised to an unprecedented degree. One response is associated with what the Indian scholar Patha Chatterjee calls the ‘imperial prerogative’, the power to declare an exception from the rules that others are expected to follow. US president Joe Biden’s attack on the moves by the International Criminal Court chief prosecutor to seek arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, despite endorsing the court’s attempts to bring Russian president Vladimir Putin to justice, exemplifies this tendency. This puts the very notion of international law and universal human rights under enormous strain and challenge. It reinforces the sentiment that US governments only support liberal rules when it is in their interests to do so. And by undermining the institutions that should be a check against resurgent imperialisms, it strengthens those that more explicitly oppose democracy and human rights.

The latest wave of imperialism has been marked by a rise in genocidal techniques of ‘population management’ and control. These methods can be found in a number of different states that cross different geopolitical ‘camps’. To analyse them we have to reject the idea that there is some kind of ‘anti-imperialist club’ of states aligned against the hypocrisy of the west.

Reactionary implications

The belief that the non-western geopolitical ‘camp’ is automatically progressive, a position with origins in the cold war era, is sometimes referred to as ‘campism’. George Galloway, whose by-election triumph in Rochdale earlier this year briefly propelled him back into the spotlight of UK politics, has long expressed some of the most reactionary implications of this thinking. At the high point of the Syrian civil war, he repeatedly defended the regime of Bashar al-Assad. He even condemned as traitors the Palestinian resistance movements based in Syria that had sided with the opposition to the regime, while lauding the pro-Assad Lebanese Islamist paramilitary group, Hezbollah.

Another, nominally more ‘Marxist’, version of this thinking is found in the arguments of Vijay Prashad who has celebrated the rise of China’s model of state capitalism, mischaracterising it as a socialist force leading the non-western states to a new world order. Prashad has even described China’s cultural genocide against the Uygur people as a progressive ‘deradicalisation’ integration policy.

Campist positions usually combine some level of political affinity to such states with strong assertions of the maxim that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’. Ironically, this is similar to the ‘realpolitik’ associated with the former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger. He divided the world into ‘spheres of influence’ and treated such questions as international law and human rights as trivial compared to the ‘hard-headed’ pursuit of state power within these supposed ‘spheres’.

The campist left inverts the Kissingerian formula. Rather than a defence of the west and US geopolitical interests, they appeal to an often-vague ‘anti-imperialism’. This group sees itself as the main, perhaps the ‘only’, true opponents of the US empire. But in reality they replicate imperial modes of

thinking that erase the experiences of peoples living under authoritarian regimes. My co-conspirator Leila Al-Shami once described this aptly as the ‘anti-imperialism of idiots’. Opposition to these states is often dismissed as ‘liberalism’, as if the people who oppose their governments are mere collaterals in the march of the revolution. This type of thinking is logical for someone with Kissinger’s conservative and nationalistic politics. But it makes no sense for those that support genuine internationalism based on mutual respect and solidarity.

Assad and Netanyahu

The campist analysis misses the commonalities between states that appear to be in different ‘camps’ and the often-eclectic nature of their international relations. The Assad regime has in the not-too-distant past happily positioned itself as a western ally. It took part, for example, in the CIA’s torture programmes after 9/11. The Assad regime also bombed and destroyed the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, which had more than 130,000 inhabitants before 2011. It is now largely ethnically cleansed. For its part, Israel has combined its special relationship with the US by cultivating ties with Russia. Prime minister Netanyahu has actively appealed to Israeli citizens of Russian heritage and, in 2019, his party even put up billboards in Tel Aviv picturing him with Putin, celebrating their close political affinity.

Assad’s destruction of Yarmouk was preceded by a campaign of dehumanisation. This has strong echoes in the practices of the Israeli state in Gaza today. The value of a Palestinian person under such a worldview is negligible. Palestinians have been so thoroughly dehumanised that the Israeli state views them as a ‘demographic threat’, and not a people with rights and freedoms. As the Israeli state controls the territory known as ‘Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories’ between the ‘river and the sea’, this dehumanising logic necessitates the creation of a second class of human beings, a system of semi-formalised apartheid.

Perhaps more revealing still is the way the Israeli government has come to understand the practice of this apartheid system of governance over Palestinians. This system has some similarity to the concept of ‘useful Syria’ that was used to describe Bashar al-Assad’s vision for ruling over the specific parts of the country that he and his Iranian allies value. This useful/useless dichotomy continues to influence the regime’s politics and practices today. It is an inherently violent logic that requires regular acts of violence, from direct bombardments to mass incarceration, torture and executions, to reaffirm absolute power over the civilian population.

‘Useless’ and dangerous

Assad was unusually forthright and open in speaking about the ‘useful’ and ‘unuseful’. But it projects. Both Zionism and Assadism are threatened by Palestinians and Syrians refusing to live subservient lives.

Assadism is perhaps best summed up by the pro-regime militia who wrote ‘Assad or we burn the country’ on the walls of besieged Syrian cities. This mirrors the practices of Israeli settler colonialism today, one perhaps best exposed by the IDF soldiers posing for holiday-style photographs amid the rubble of destroyed Palestinian homes in Gaza. In both cases there is a logic of extermination at play. But identifying such parallels is impossible in the campist perspective, which views one bombed out school as a horrible crime against humanity and another bombed out school as some kind of conspiracy to make a benevolent dictator look bad.

The campist approach misses the fact that such governments learn from and cooperate with one another. Israel has a long history of selling weapons that have been ‘battle-tested’ on Palestinians to other states, treating the indigenous Palestinian people as have to endure the erasure of their struggle because it doesn’t fit in a western-centric notion of anti-imperialism.

The line from Yarmouk or Aleppo to Gaza is much shorter than is often perceived. Those living under either Zionist or Assadist regimes deserve much more than what the international community is willing to give them. It is up to the anti-authoritarian and internationalist left to oppose any and all attempts to

But these people, fairly obviously I think, weren’t practising anarchism. Most of the anarchists I’ve criticised above would agree with me here. It was anarchism only in the popular misapprehension of the word, as ‘disorder’. It wasn’t the PYD either. The PYD is more sophisticated, and wouldn’t want to be represented thus. These people weren’t even Stalinists. It wasn’t politics of any kind, but something else.

So people mustn’t blame anarchism for them. And even if the whole Western anarchist tradition, from the intellectuals to the ‘lifestyle’ punksters, does nothing for you at all, still don’t blame anarchism. Because as far as I can see, where anarchism actually exists (rather than being talked about) is usually among people who wouldn’t think for a moment to call themselves anarchists. Even among people who might describe themselves as Muslims.

In terms of practical community cooperation, grassroots democratic self-organisation, and building civil projects without the state, the councils in liberated Syria are anarchist. Some are more hierarchical than others, of course, some dominated by family or tribal leaders, some directly elected, some only indirectly, and so on. They aren’t perfect, because human beings aren’t perfect, and mainly because they haven’t had a chance in their brief existence to discuss political institutions at length. Instead they’re living an emergency that’s gone on for many years, they’re being hit with missiles, artillery, barrels, chlorine, they have a food problem, a water problem, a fuel problem, an electricity problem. Their work is immediate and practical, and therefore non-ideological. That is, they are not implementing an ideological program. The men who talk of that kind of thing are more likely the Islamist fighters, who need ideology to fight with. And ISIS of course, with its statehood plan. And the followers of political parties.

When people ask ‘Who should we support in Syria?’ I should say: in Syria no political party, militia or army is worthy of our wholehearted or uncritical support. No ideology either. What we should support are the community-grown democratic and quasi-democratic institutions and the civilian communities they represent. These people deserve support which is both critical and absolute. Critical because nothing should be uncritical. Absolute because these survivors inside are under continuous and full-scale military assault, beleaguered and at risk of extinction.

It seems to me to be an anarchist principle to support the oppressed against their oppressors.

In this and several other revolutions, anarchism is what has happened when communities became free of the state, free of its services as well as its overbearing impositions. It happened by necessity, and through creative innovation. At European distance the theoretical question becomes: could the most positive, egalitarian and democratic aspects of this social experience provide lessons for societies like these ones here, not at war, relatively stable and prosperous? It’s a question worth asking. But to work up an answer you’d have to think and listen. Play-acting revolution precludes that.

<https://qunfuz.com/2016/10/31/anarchism/>

London Anarchist Bookfair

Leila Al-Shami (29.10.16)

Today I was invited to speak at the London Anarchist Bookfair, an event I was excited to attend, to talk about the situation in Syria. Unfortunately the event did not take place. We were shut down by a guy called Amir Taaki (a British-Iranian who claims to be a developer of Bitcoin and someone who apparently Forbes magazine considered ‘their top 30 under 30 list for 2014’ as he had previously proudly told me by email) along with around seven of his friends (one dressed in full military garb, a real revolutionary maybe?)

Firstly, I would like to apologize to those who attended the event and had wanted to learn about the situation in Syria, an issue of critical importance. Some had come from as far afield as Birmingham to hear myself and Robin Yassin Kassab speak. Unfortunately as we were about to begin, Amir and his friends stormed the event chanting “PKK”, “YPG” and accusing myself and Robin of being “fascists”, “Arab nationalists” and “supporters of jihadi groups such as Ahrar Al Sham which advocate stoning women to death”. I will not respond to the claims as anyone who is familiar with mine or Robin’s work will

know they are absurd. And for those not familiar, I refer you to our book ‘Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War’ (Pluto Press); make up your own minds.

Amir had previously contacted me by email demanding (not asking) that he be given 30 minutes of our talk to talk about Rojava, as he had spent some time there fighting for the YPG and working with various committees. (He had previously been refused a platform by the Bookfair). I responded that we already had a Syrian Kurdish anarchist, Shiar Neyo, invited to come and talk about Rojava for the second half of our talk (he was speaking at the No Border’s session for the first half) and that our talk was not just about Rojava, but about Syria as a whole, plus there was another talk organized at the Bookfair for 5pm which focused specifically on Rojava. He responded claiming he “is probably the person who knows the most about Rojava at the moment” and that he is “qualified to speak about Syria more than anyone else right now.” Such arrogance epitomizes everything that is wrong with egotistical western solidarity. That he – a foreigner who has spent a few months in the region – believes he is more qualified to speak on Rojava than a Syrian-Kurd from Rojava himself.

So, as a result of his bullying, he was given a 10 minute platform to speak, even though the organizers had tried to get him off the stage. He used his time to talk about “Mesopotamia” and “pyramids” and then refused to leave the platform. It then descended into a physical punch-up between Amir and his cronies and audience members who had come to hear myself, Robin and Shiar speak about Syria – both Arab and Kurdish struggles. We had in particular wanted to focus on anti-authoritarian struggles, self-organization as well as issues of militarism, sectarianism and the rise of Islamist extremist groups. There would have also been one hour for audience questions and discussion, to learn from each others views and perspectives. But we were met with aggressiveness. I have spoken at events with *Shabiha* in attendance where we were treated with more respect. In the end the audience, myself and Robin left. And Amir remained talking to his seven friends ...

Amir and his friends did a great disservice to the Kurdish struggle today by claiming to represent it and shutting down open debate. Myself, Robin and Shiar had gone in the spirit of mutual solidarity across Kurdish and Arab struggles and we were faced with blind sectarianism by people who rudely and aggressively prevented our event from taking place. If anarchism is about cult-like chanting the name of a political party and preventing Syrians from talking about Syria, then I am not an anarchist.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2016/10/29/london-anarchist-bookfair/>

Challenging the Nation State in Syria

Leila Al Shami (12.5.16)

Syria’s current borders were drawn up by imperial map makers a hundred years ago in the midst of World War I as part of a secret accord between France and Britain to divide the Mideast spoils of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. As the colonial state gave way to the post-independence state, power was transferred from Western masters to local elites.

The three major discourses which grew out of the anti-colonial struggle—socialism, Arab nationalism, and Islamism—all fetishized the idea of a strong state as the basis of resistance to Western hegemony. In the case of Syria, it led to the emergence of an ultra-authoritarian regime where power is centralized around one man in Damascus, Bashar al-Assad, bolstered by the state bureaucracy, and security forces. But today, new ways of organizing have emerged which challenge centralized authority and the state framework.

During the course of the revolution against Assad that began in Syria in 2011, land was liberated to the extent that by 2013 the regime had lost control over some four-fifths of the country. As the state began to disintegrate, communities needed to build alternative structures to keep life functioning in the newly created autonomous zones.

The model which emerged was based on the vision of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, who produced a paper in November 2011, in the eighth month of the revolution, advocating the establishment of local councils.

detention, and rape can lead to divorce or rejection by the family. A tool of displacement, many have fled the country due to the threat of rape.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that 13,920 women have been arrested or forcibly disappeared in Syria between March 2011 and November 2016, mainly by the regime. Yet, even in the brutal conditions of detention, Syrian women have shown their courage and agency. In July 2013, a group of female detainees in the infamous Adra prison went on hunger strike. They were indefinitely detained by the terrorism court, and amongst them were elderly, pregnant and sick women. The hunger-strikers demanded their right to a fair trial, to receive family visits and to access medical care.

Women in Syria face numerous challenges yet continue to struggle against fascism, imperialism and patriarchy. Yet with the partial exception of Syrian-Kurdish women in the north, they are absent from mainstream narratives on Syria, relegated invisible by the focus on military struggle, a male hegemonic domain. Syrian women play an essential role in the civil resistance and in community organizing. But they have received little support from western feminists or a left which prefers to see them as victims rather than the strong revolutionaries they are. The problem, of course, lies with western feminists and the left, not with Syrian women.

^[1] Syria Untold, ‘Jana: Women of Raqqa reclaim their place in society’, 30 November 2013.

https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2016/12/29/fighting-on-all-fronts-womens-resistance-in-syria/

Anarchism

Robin Yassin-Kassab (31.10.16)

I came across anarchism too late in life to start calling myself an anarchist. At earlier stages I’d enjoyed attaching labels to myself, like ‘leftist’, or ‘Arab’, or ‘Muslim’. I was never a great believer in any of them, but I tried.

When the Arab revolutions made politics real for me, I became suspicious of adopting any labels, given as they referred to me, and politics wasn’t about me any more, not about my fantasies of myself, my need to see myself as on the right side, or my ‘identity’. When the revolutions broke out, and then the counter-revolutions and wars, I understood that real politics concerns the actual struggles of real people in the real world. (I also understood that all identity politics is ultimately a distraction, and one most often used by those in power – or those who aim to achieve power – to divide and rule their subjects). I became suspicious of all grand narratives and all ideological frameworks which assumed there was a perfect solution to human problems as well as a clear path towards it.

So I’m not going to call myself an anarchist. And even if I wanted to, I probably couldn’t, because I am ultimately undecided on the question of whether people could do better without states and hierarchical authority. I’d like to believe that we could run complex modern societies on a horizontal basis more successfully than we do at present, but then I don’t know if I have that much faith in humanity. Perhaps we do need hierarchy of some sort to organise ourselves and to control our anti-social urges, and the best we can hope to do is reform and restrain the hierarchy. I don’t know. I need to read much more and think much more – and even when I do, if I decide I know for sure one way or the other, please ask me to check my arrogance. I’m not capable of knowing. None of us are.

I’ve written a book about Syria with someone who describes herself as an anarchist, and I agree with her on nearly everything. Plus I’ve found anarchists much less likely than leftists to be snagged by allegiance to some state or other. Their conversation on Syria is therefore likely to be much more interesting. At those book events we’ve done which were liberally salted by anarchists, in Seattle, for instance, or Toronto, the discussion was intelligent, nuanced, informed. Compassionate too. I admired the anarchists I met in Spain for several reasons. Most of them at least.

But then Noam Chomsky has been described as an anarchist. Here’s where I get confused, because Chomsky doesn’t usually (or ever?) adhere to what I think are anarchist principles.

I’m not an expert on either Chomsky or anarchist principles, but I’ve seen Chomsky say that what Russia is doing in Syria may be wrong, but it certainly isn’t imperialism. And it’s not imperialism because Russia was invited in by the sovereign Syrian government.

Let’s leave aside that Chomsky began his political career opposing the American imperialist intervention in Vietnam, and that America was invited in by the sovereign South Vietnamese government. The point here is Chomsky’s deference to the notion of state (rather than popular) sovereignty. Is it ‘anarchist’ to think that an unelected mafia which has killed hundreds of thousands of victims and burnt the country it stole has more sovereignty than the people inhabiting that country? That a distant foreign power is not imperialist when it seeks to keep its satrap in his seat by contributing to his crimes? (In that case the British empire wasn’t imperialist either). We know that under the international law written by statesmen, the argument can certainly be made that Russia has not ‘invaded’ Syria, because the official on the local throne asked Russia to come in. But anarchists are supposed to reject such sophistry.

Surely Chomsky is a leftist rather than an anarchist. His very useful work on Palestine-Israel also offers critiques and solutions in terms of states. So I think we can discount him as an example.

There’s also a very large section of people who describe themselves as anarchists and then cheerlead for the Syrian-Kurdish PYD, or its Turkish-Kurdish parent the PKK. This is in part because the PYD/PKK has incorporated, in theory at least, some very interesting and positive ideas and vocabulary from the American anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin. The PYD welcomes Western visitors, gives them a wonderful tour, keeps tabs on them very carefully. It’s done good outreach work, and you can’t fault that.

The first impulse of Western anarchists to show solidarity with the long-oppressed Kurds in their experiment in ‘democratic confederalism’, gender equality, and social justice, is of course a good one. But many, in their enthusiasm, have become blind to certain facts: that despite its undoubted achievements, the PYD remains an authoritarian single party-militia which monopolises violence in its territory, seizes control of aid money, bans other Kurdish parties, and shoots at protestors. That its occupation of Arab-majority towns outside of the Rojava cantons is not ‘democratic confederalism’ but an attempt to build a territorially-contiguous state. That it has enjoyed both Russian and American airpower in its quest for territory, and hosts the first American military base in Syria.

The PYD undoubtedly represents many Syrian Kurds, and is working in a very difficult environment, sinned against (most notably by ISIS, at Kobani) as well as sinning. Within the larger Syrian context it often acts as a counter-revolutionary force, but it has achieved nationalist and to an extent democratic aims for Kurds in the three cantons. It is understandable and good, therefore, that Western anarchists show solidarity.

When the solidarity becomes uncritical, it becomes problematic. When it coheres around the party-militia rather than around the people, it stops being anarchist. When it happily partakes in (repeats, shares, retweets) PYD propaganda, it slips rapidly into racism and Islamophobia. Some ‘intellectual’ anarchists, people who should know better, will rehearse this stuff, about the FSA being a bunch of child-killers, and how ISIS and Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham and the FSA are all the same, and Turkey too, and the Gulf barbarians…

Do they not realise that this is Assadist as well as PYD propaganda? More than that, that these are the old tropes of European imperialist racism – the favoured minority under threat by the dark, barbaric races that surround, in this case the Arabs, the Muslims, those who can’t do democracy because of their hard-wired culture, who can only be controlled.

At its most extreme, this tendency is manifested in the behaviour of the weird cultish people who closed down our event at the London anarchist bookfair. If one tried to shout over them they joined in chanting ‘PYD’ (and ‘PKK’). When someone in the audience, a Lebanese of Catholic family, spoke back to them, they screamed about him being ‘a Sunni Arab’ – as if this was some awful taint. I left pretty soon. Leila chose to stay, thinking she might find a chance to speak (she didn’t). Once when she did open her mouth, one of the cult screamed at her: “Shut up! This is anarchism! Anyone can speak!” No irony.

‘divide and rule’ into such categories of population management, no matter what the rhetoric of the state practising these techniques may be.

The global spread of authoritarianism raises a need for sharpened analysis on the left. This should foreground the role of movements fighting for democratic change ‘from below’ regardless of the geopolitical alignments of the states and regimes they are contending with.

https://www.redpepper.org.uk/global-politics/war/left-analyses-of-imperialism-must-stand-against-campism/

Give Us Our Land Back

The Golan Heights, Greenwashing, Syria and Palestine’s Intertwined Revolutions

Banah Ghadbian (6.8.24)

Since October 7, social media accounts have circulated “viral” images of the genocide in Gaza that are actually from Syria. For example, social media users have posted an image of Palestinian children naming their dreams (“I want to eat bread; I want my father to be released from prison”). These posts are meant to raise awareness about Zionist prisons, yet the image is from Abdallah Al-Khatib’s *Little Palestine: Diary of a Siege*—a film about the Assad regime’s siege of Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, not the Zionist occupation of Gaza.

The misrecognition of these images and their decontextualized circulation show the similar experiences of genocide under the Assad regime and in Gaza. Susan Abulhawa posted graffiti that read “when and where I die does not concern me. All I care about is for the screams and chants of the revolutionaries to remain and fill the earth with their agitation until there is no more injustice built on the bodies of the poor and defenseless.” Although Abulhawa labeled the graffiti as “written on the ruins of Gaza,” it is actually from the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution archives. Instead of using this “viral” moment for self-reflection on the way our collective movements intersect, this same activist cast doubt on Assad’s chemical weapons attacks in Syria. The experiences of those now called “Syrian-Palestinians” (Syrians displaced from Syria to Gaza) and Palestinian-Syrians (Palestinians displaced from Palestine to Syria) reveal deeply overlapping experiences of structural violence. Why are Syria and Gaza’s conditions so similar? Is there a consciousness that can encompass a critique of patriarchy, colonialism, environmental destruction, classism, ableism, and authoritarian violence simultaneously?

This intervention examines: 1) Assad’s treatment of Palestinians in Syria as part of the motivation for the Syrian Uprisings; 2) the Zionist entity’s settler occupation of Syria in Golan and its use of “greenwashing”; 3) places and movements among Syrians where consciousness of multiple oppressions converge, and in particular, where a relationship to earth (using roses and apples as technologies of resistance) defies both the settler-colonial and neoliberal regime logics of domination.

The Assad Regime and Palestinians of Syria

In March 2011, a popular uprising began in Syria. Children of rural Deraa scribbled graffiti on their school walls that read “Your Turn Doctor!”; “Freedom! Freedom!;” and the Arab Spring slogan, “the People Want the Fall of the Regime.” Community members flooded Deraa’s streets on March 18, 2011, the “Friday of Dignity,” to demand accountability from the Syrian state. The Assad’s regime’s betrayal of Palestine, treatment of ethnic minorities, threats of sexual violence toward Deraan mothers, and the egregious state of prisoner’s rights and the conditions of disenfranchised farm-working communities were at the roots of the revolutionary fervor. The regime’s responded by first shooting down protestors, then barrel-bombing their neighborhoods (with chemical weapons such as chlorine, sarin, napalm), and committing crimes against humanity. Despite this response, a struggle for dignity blossomed in Syria.

A few months after the initial Deraa protests, on Nakba Day (May 15), a thousand protesters from Syria marched towards the Zionist-occupied Golan Heights near Quneitra and Majdal Shams. This protest, dubbed the “Third Intifada” on Facebook, was part of a coordinated regional uprising against Zionist borders in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Residents of the Golan were shocked by young Palestinians from Syria, who carried photographs of their grandmothers and deeds to their families’ land in their arms. Their bravery broke the fear of landmines on the border. Since 1975, the Israeli military had told residents of Golan that landmines lined the border and could not be crossed; two Syrians died stepping on them. In 2011 as Palestinian youth marched, Golan’s residents realized that the border was permeable. The Palestinian youth showed the Golanis a borderless future, one where they broke not only the physical barrier but the psychological trauma of occupation. As Golani Syrians welcomed Palestinian youth with food and water, one resident said that watching the Palestinians cross the border was like a dream, and that “what Arab armies have not been able to do, the Palestinian youth did.”

On June 5, 2011, the anniversary of the 1967 Zionist invasion into Syria, protestors coming from Syria stormed the border again to commemorate the Naksa. This time, Zionist snipers injured 350 protestors and murdered 23 more as they marched. Many of the protestors who came out every Friday against the Assad regime took part in these anti-Zionist marches against colonial occupation.

One such protestor was Khaled Bakrawi, a twenty-six year-old Palestinian-Syrian from Yarmouk, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in the world, located on the outskirts of Damascus (Syria is home to twelve Palestine refugee camps). During the Naksa march, Israeli snipers shot Khaled and injured him. Bakrawi wrote, “it was a day in which the refugees’ fear was broken and a day in which they reclaimed their voice and image. What took place that day was legendary; it returned hope to millions of refugees and it returned joy to the camps.” Bakrawi returned to Yarmouk and cofounded the Jafra Foundation, aiding newly displaced refugees fleeing Tadamon, Hajar Aswad, and Babila. The regime police arrested Bakrawi in Damascus’s Mezza neighborhood at the end of 2012. He died under torture in Assad’s prisons two months later. The Assad regime shelled Yarmouk refugee camp and killed Bakrawi’s friends Ahmad Kousa and Bassam Hamidi, other Palestinian-Syrian activists in the Syrian Uprisings.

According to Nayef Alsamadi, several Palestinian-Syrians were central to organizing the Syrian protests, including George Talamas (who worked to provide relief for wounded protestors) and Adnan Abdurahman (a Palestinian Syrian who led protests). Other Palestinian-Syrian activists such as Bassel Khartabil Safadi turned the digital cultures of the resistance movement into a secret physical space in downtown Damascus known as Aikilab for revolutionary journalists. He was subsequently imprisoned, tortured, and executed in Adra Prison in 2015.

The Assad regime and its security apparatus is notorious for its abuse and treatment of Palestinians in Syria as second-class citizens. This is why Khaled Bakrawi and other Palestinian-Syrian dedicated their lives to fighting both Zionism and Syria’s authoritarian regime. Connecting Syrians’ struggle against Assad to the anti-Zionist struggle can deeply strengthen our movement and transform the larger, enveloping region, known as Bilad al-Sham. *Bilad al-Sham* is an Arabic term that means *Greater Syria*. The region encompasses the precolonial borders before the French and British carved up Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

There is a persistent myth that the Assad regime fights Zionism—a tactic Razzan Ghazzawi and Nayrouz Abu Hatoum call sumoud-washing. From its inception, the Assad regime used the Palestine cause to argue that Syria was in a state of emergency and needed to be under martial law. The Emergency Martial law suspended *habeas corpus* and expanded the definition of what characterizes a political crime, as any “offense against the security of the state.” Today, Bashar al Assad’s Instagram often posts in solidarity with the people of Gaza, but history shows us the Syrian regime has long acted otherwise.

In 1976 Hafez al-Assad, with US support, backed far-right, Christian extremist Phalangists and massacred three thousand Palestinians in Tal al Zaatar refugee camp in Lebanon. During the civilian evacuation, Assad’s militia forces machine-gunned Palestinian refugees. The Syrian offensive on the camp lasted two months. Syrian militias prohibited food, basic supplies, and even the Red Cross from entering the camp. On the night of August 14, 1976, Hafez Al-

Assad’s forces stormed the camp and massacred thousands. The assault on Tal al Zaatar was not an isolated incident, as the Syrian regime also besieged Jisser Al-Basha and Al-Kalantina, two other Palestinian refugee camps.

Beyond direct assault, the Syrian regime operates through carceral violence. It uses imprisonment as a key tactic to quell Palestinian voices in Syria. This strategy parallels the Zionists’ prison systems. In the 1980s, Hafez al-Assad imprisoned and executed hundreds of Palestinian dissidents in the Palestinian Popular Committee, Fatah, and the Party for Communist Action. His son Bashar al-Assad carried on that tradition and thousands of Palestinians have languished in his prisons. The Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria documents the current detainment of over 1,796 Palestinian-Syrians in Syrian prisons and the murder of 4,048 Palestinian-Syrians since 2011. At least 644 Palestinian detainees have died under torture in the Assad regime’s detention centers since March 2011. Many Palestinians and Syrians languish in the “Palestine Branch” of these centers—or what is known as Branch 235 by the regime’s Military Intelligence—where approximately ten to fifteen people are killed under torture per day.

Like the Zionist state, the Assad regime censors public thought as part of its strategy of suppression. In 2009, the Assad regime imprisoned a seventeen-year-old Syrian named Tal Malouhi for blogging poems about Palestine. In February 2011, after three years of detention without charge, the State Security Court sentenced Malouhi to prison for treason. She became known as one of the youngest prisoners of conscience in the world. Her poems echo a popular memory of Assad’s betrayal of Palestine:

Oh Jerusalem, Oh Damascus
Oh scent of clay, Oh orange blossoms....
Oh you my Arab blood
Oh star between you and me
who illuminates Jerusalem from my flesh and blood
from my ocean to my gulf
Before the people handed us over to invaders
To the king who sat on my coffin
And the mourners who were captive
from that fragile time
Oh Jerusalem, has our identity been lost?

Malouhi expresses a fiercely rooted reminder of the ontology of land, being, and identity in a consciousness of Bilad al-Sham that sees the authoritarianism as an inherent failure to protect the land from occupation, that is, as a betrayal of the body and lineage.

The Assad regime mimics Zionist strategies of starvation sieges, mass shelling, and chemical weapons. Assad’s forces besieged Yarmouk Refugee Camp in December 2012 and blockaded the camp until 2014, preventing people, food, and medical supplies from leaving or entering. A report by Amnesty International revealed that the regime used starvation tactics against civilians. The regime launched rockets and dropped chemical rain from airplanes during the siege. The “viral” images of Yarmouk’s children in 2012–2014 could viscerally mirror Gazan children’s 2023–2024 reality in such a deep way because of the affinity of tactics between the Assad regime and the Zionist occupation.

The Golan Heights and the Zionist Greenwashing of Syria

Syria and Palestine’s struggles are intertwined by both Assad’s treatment of the Palestinians and the Zionist occupation of Syrian land. In 1967, Zionist forces stole the Golan Heights in Syria and displaced 95 percent of its population overnight. Zionist militias destroyed 340 Syrian villages and farms. Only 5 remained—Majdal Shams, Buqatha, Masa’ada, Ein Qenyah, and Al G’ager. Over 130,000 Syrians were forced to flee and today only around 26,000 Syrians remain in the area.

A few weeks before the 1967 invasion, Syrian residents of the Golan watched as Syrian military generals and soldiers mysteriously packed up their bags and left the abandoning vulnerable populations under the aerial bombings and machine gunfire of the Zionist army on June 5. One resident recalled they thought they were leaving just for the summer. While researching children’s youth theater in Syria for my dissertation, I came across modifications of revolution songs that memorialize this abandonment. The song *يا حيف* Ya 7eif (Oh Shame) by Samih Shuqer—who is from Quneitra, a Golani village that was invaded by in Israel in 1967 and almost completely obliterated, but later handed back to Syria in 1974—croons “oh shame on you who showers bullets on defenseless people and arrests children as young as roses, the son of our country, killing our children.” In children’s theatre performances near Idlib, I watched as rural communities sang the line “you’re still mocking us, shame on you, oh son who sold the Golan.” This line evokes popular memory of Hafez al Assad’s betrayal of the residents of Golan. It slips between the cracks of the regime’s official historical self-representation as valiantly fighting Zionist violence.

Before the Zionist invasion, the Golan Heights represented a quintessentially Syrian mosaic of ethnic and religious diversity: Circassians, an ethnic group who fled Russian persecution in the nineteenth century, comprised 10 percent of the population; Turkmanis, or Tukorman, who came to Golan in the 1500s, resided throughout the region; Kurds and Armenians lived in Quneitra; and Maghribis and Bedouin tribes lived in its villages. Palestinian refugees from 1948 were part of this social fabric. Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Alawites, Ismaili’s and Shi’as all lived in the region. Zionist settler-colonial strategy was to ethnically cleanse the Golan Heights and erase its diversity, leaving behind a population comprised mostly of Druze Arabs.

In 1981, the Israeli Knesset passed its illegal annexation of the Golan and attempted to force its remaining Druze Syrian Arab inhabitants to take Israeli citizenship, which they refused. The proud farmers of Golan protested annexation by halting labor on their lands in a six-month strike in 1982. The Zionist entity held the Golan under siege as punishment, cutting off electricity and water, and burning crops and livestock to the ground. In response to the blockade, Golanis erupted in mass protests, violated curfew to tend their crops, distributed free food among the community, built their own education cooperatives, and constructed alternative irrigation and sewage systems.

In 1983, in retaliation for two years of coordinated civil resistance, fifteen thousand Zionist troops invaded Golan and put its Syrian residents under a forty-three-day siege. One resident, Naseba Keesh Smara, said that “the village was full of Israeli policemen with guns and weapons. They knocked on every door, they knew where everyone lived, they threw the passports inside and then shut the door. We collected [the Israeli passports], went to the main square of Majdal Shams, threw them in the soldiers’ faces and ran back home. There were also some people who burnt them. We belong to Syria, we weren’t frightened by the soldiers. We felt like we would go back to Syria.” In parallel with the French separation of Syria into a Sunni Arab, Shi’a Alawite, and Druze ethnic states during the mandate period, the Zionist entity tried to leverage a sectarian strategy on Druze communities in the region to alienate them from their Arabness. “We see this for what it is,” said Dr. Tayseer Maray of Golan for Development, “an attempt to create a false category, as if we are defined by our various religious affiliations instead of the reality that we are united by our national identity; we are all Syrian Arabs.” This history of repression and division is the immediate context for the Syrian Druze’s attempt to kick out Prime Minister Netanyahu and Finance Minister Smotrich from visiting their villages last week after airstrikes killed twelve children playing soccer—they called him a “fascist,” a “criminal,” and a “child killer,” despite the Zionist state trying to coopt the tragedy for its own aims.

Part of the egregiousness of the 1981–1983 sieges was the battle over water. When Israeli laws became enforced in the Golan after its illegal annexation in 1981, the Israeli Water Authority had to approve any use of water on Syrian farms and homes, including the construction of tanks to collect rainwater. The fact that native Syrian Golanis constructed their own sewage and irrigation systems in revolt shows their fierce ties to their land.

In response, the Zionist entity deploys a tactic of “greenwashing” to separate Syrians from their water. The Golan is situated at the head of the Jordan River, whose tributaries include the Baniyas, Dan, and Hasbani Rivers. Israel pumps water from the Golan’s many lakes to its settlements. Today Golan

Fighting on all fronts: Women’s resistance in Syria

Leila Al Shami (29.12.16)

As eastern Aleppo falls, pounded by regime and Russian airstrikes, and stormed by Iranian sponsored militia on the ground, one young woman risks everything to communicate to the outside world the horror of the last days in the liberated part of the city.

Lina Shamy is in her twenties. She is one of many courageous activists using social media to describe the terror wrought on civilians trapped in the besieged, rebel held area with no safe place to flee. They are caught in the most tragic of circumstances, surrounded by death and destruction as barrel bombs, chlorine and phosphorous rain from the skies. As known activists, they cannot flee to regime held areas, where east Aleppo civilians have been shot, arrested or sent to the front lines to fight. Theirs is a waiting game.

At the time of writing, as another ceasefire deal collapses, Lina has just posted a video on Twitter. Standing on a balcony, she steadies the camera in one hand, the sound of relentless shelling in the background. “The criminal Assad regime and the Iranians have broke the ceasefire and are back to attack civilians,” she tells us. In another video she slams the international community for failing to respond to the human suffering engulfing Syria. “Isn’t it our right ... as revolutionaries who refused oppression and slavery, who called for freedom and dignity to face this unjust regime with our voices and peaceful demonstrations without being exposed to arresting or to the worst kinds of torturing or killing or displacement?” she asks. Yet, despite the horror and deafening international silence over the obliteration of Free Aleppo, she retains faith that people will rise up, show their solidarity and call their political leaders to action. On 12 December, as horrific atrocities were were being perpetrated across the city, she appealed to the Twittersphere: ‘Humans all over the world, don’t sleep! You can do something! Protest now!’

Lina does not conform to lazy western (imperialist) stereotypes of Syrian/Muslim women as weak and submissive, as having no agency, oppressed above all by their own culture and religion. Nor does she conform to the orientalist portrayal of Assad’s opposition as all being crazed jihadi militants. She is a strong, revolutionary, Arab woman. She accepts neither Assad’s domestic tyranny nor invading foreign occupation forces. Through appearing on camera, she defiantly rejects traditional social mores, which often render women invisible or silent. Hers is a struggle against fascism, imperialism and patriarchy.

Far from being pushed to the sidelines, women have been at the forefront of the civil resistance to the Assad regime. In the early days of the revolution, before the security situation deteriorated, they could be seen on the streets in large numbers, protesting against the state and its brutality. Women have played key roles in revolutionary organization. The two largest grassroots coalitions to emerge in 2011 were both established by women: the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) by Razan Zeitouneh, and the Syrian Revolution General Commission by Suhair Attassi. The LCCs were a remarkable example of horizontal, youth-led organizing and represented the very best of the revolution’s ideals: they were inclusive, democratic and non-sectarian. Women were active in the committees which organized civil disobedience and later humanitarian assistance, and also participated in the media work the LCCs undertook to communicate the messages of the revolution to the outside world. In Aleppo, Radio Naseem was established as the first women-owned independent radio station. Journalist Zaina Erhaim from Idlib, meanwhile, trained numerous women in citizen journalism and helped establish a Women’s Blog with the Damascus Bureau. The blog features stories of remarkable women from all walks of life who have responded to the revolution and war in committed and creative ways.

Women have also been at the forefront of resistance to some of the more extreme Islamist militias which grew in prominence as Syria burned. Some have implemented repressive measures against women, such as strict dress codes. Razan Zeitouneh, along with activists Samira Khalil, Wael Hamadeh, and Nazem Hammadi, was kidnapped in December 2013, most likely by the armed opposition group, Jaish Al Islam. Razan, an unveiled and fiercely

independent human rights activist, was a strong critic not only of the regime, but of all authoritarian groups, including Jaish Al Islam. This was a likely reason for her abduction. In Raqqa, Jana, a woman’s organization founded for women to ‘assert their role in rebuilding their society and to take their rightful place next to men in the Syrian revolution’, carried out demonstrations against the hardline Islamist militia Ahrar Al Sham. They distributed bread when there were shortages and rehabilitated a high school. The women who founded Jana are all religious, yet they have struggled against political Islamism in the movement. Their struggle is against the authoritarian mentality. ‘Religion is a personal matter, and no one has the right to force it on other people,’ explained one of their members.^[1]

In Daesh-occupied areas, women have bravely resisted the organization’s brutality. In 2013 schoolteacher Souad Nofal from Raqqa carried out a one-woman demonstration against Daesh every day for two months. Alone, she stood outside their headquarters holding banners – one calling for the release of detainees, another showing solidarity with Christians whose churches had been destroyed. She became an icon of women’s resistance for Syrian revolutionaries. Eventually she fled to Europe. Others were not so lucky. Late last year 30-year-old Ruqia Hassan (known by her pseudonym ‘Nissan Ibrahim’) a Syrian Kurd living in Raqqa, was murdered by Daesh. A former philosophy student at Aleppo university, she joined the early protests against the Assad regime and when Daesh took over her city continued to speak out and document the horrific conditions of life under Daesh occupation. She provided regular updates on airstrikes by the international coalition and Russian forces. In one of her last Facebook posts she wrote “I’m in Raqqa and I receive death threats. When ISIL arrest me and kill me it’s ok, because while they will cut off my head, I will have dignity, which is better than living in humiliation.”

As the state collapsed women have often taken a leading role in supporting their communities and building alternatives to the state’s totalitarianism. Today they work as doctors, nurses and teachers in underground clinics and schools. They volunteer for the White Helmets and sacrifice their lives to pull victims of airstrikes from the ruins. They provide logistical support for armed groups and in some instances have taken up arms themselves, establishing women-only battalions. In the case of the Alawite general Zubaida Al Meeki, they have even trained Free Army fighters. As men have been rounded up for detention, or are killed in battle, women (including in more conservative communities) have challenged traditional gender norms and worked to provide for their families. In Baniyas women successfully negotiated a prisoner release, and in Zabadani women negotiated a temporary cease-fire to allow aid into the besieged town. Many women are more independent than before and have greater freedom in their life-choices. Of course the situation of war and displacement has also worsened conditions for many, with a reported increase in polygamy, early marriage and sex work as women struggle for survival.

Throughout the areas liberated from the regime and Daesh, women’s centres have been established to overcome obstacles to women’s participation in the political, social and economic spheres. One example is the Mazaya centre in Kafranbel, Idlib. Founded by Um Khaled in June 2013, it runs a library and provides skills and educational training to women so they can achieve financial independence. In Douma, Damascus suburbs, the local council has established an Office for Women’s Affairs headed by Rehan Bayan who tirelessly campaigns for greater women’s inclusion in the opposition’s political bodies and encourages women to take more active roles.

The greatest threat to women’s political activism remains the regime. Even prior to the revolution, independent women’s organizations were prevented from operating. Those that were permitted were closely linked to the regime and dominated by socially privileged women from urban backgrounds who had little in common with the lived experiences of most ordinary women. Today female activists and humanitarian workers are targeted for arrest and detention where they face torture and sexual abuse. Mass rape campaigns have been conducted by pro-regime forces against dissenting communities. Rape and the threat of rape is a tool used by the regime not only to counter women’s political resistance through using their bodies as a site of oppression and humiliation, but also as a tool for controlling men and breaking community social bonds. Rape taboos, and traditional notions of honour and shame, mean that sometimes there is a social stigma around women who have spent time in

torture. And when the nation is splintering, sub-national identities are reinforced. In death’s presence, people want to feel like we, not like I, because I is small and easily erased.

The sung slogan ‘Ya Allah Malna Ghairak Ya Allah’ (O God We Have Nothing But You) became ubiquitous amongst protestors facing bullets. An intense relationship with God became a survival framework for the detained. Religious slogans became cosmic rallying calls for the fighters. In the Syrian context, radicalisation is better named traumatisation.

Islamism – in both moderate and extreme forms – flourished. The trend was more pronounced amongst the fighting formations than among the people in their committees, liberated towns and villages, and refugee camps – and there were concrete reasons for this, to do with arms supply, funding and discipline. The most serious consequence for the course of the revolution was the hardening of divisions between the Sunni Arab majority and the rest, and foremost amongst them the Alawis. By 2014 battlefield events (and certainly media reports) were often dominated by the acts of the most extreme Sunni Islamist militias – either the al-Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra or the even more extreme Daesh. But at first these organisations were by no means the most important Islamist actors.

The persistence of sectarian resentment in secular, even unbelieving countries such as Ireland or Scotland reinforces an obvious point – these conflicts aren’t about theology but concern group fears and resentments, and their exploitation by power. Communal tensions, in other words, are the result not of ancient enmities but of contemporary political machinations. Communities engaged at one moment in seemingly unforgettable strife are, at another, busily engaging in intermarriage or political alliance. In Lebanon, for instance, the main civil war cleavage was Christian-Muslim, but now tends to divide Sunni-Shia, with Christian groups allied to both sides. And in Iraq, before the 2003 invasion, a third of marriages were cross-sect Sunni-Shia.

There was nothing fated about the sectarian breakdown in Syria. It was deliberately provoked and manipulated, by a host of secondary actors but primarily by the regime.

Why would the regime provoke first armed resistance and then a fierce sectarian backlash? Because Assadist policy under father and son, at home and abroad, is to present itself as the essential solution to problems it has itself manufactured – a case of the arsonist dressing up as a fireman. The double aim of the counter-revolutionary strategy was to frighten secularists and religious minorities into loyalty, and the West into tolerance of the dictatorship’s violence. The first goal has been partially achieved, the second – at the time of writing – moreso.

How did the regime undertake its project? To start with, it targetted Sunni areas for collective punishment and sectarian provocation, as Marcell Shehwaro saw: “The sensation of Sunni identity is based on something real – I can’t pretend that the regime isn’t sectarian, that there haven’t been sectarian massacres. Look, there were stages on the way. When they started killing Sunni civilians randomly as opposed to just those protesting – this increased it. People asked ‘Why are they killing my children when none were carrying arms, and while they’re sending provisions to the nearby Shia village?’ When they played Shia songs at the checkpoints in all-Sunni neighbourhoods. Then my atheist friends began asserting their Sunnism, which is now more of a social than a religious identity.”

Add to this a symbolic assault against Sunni sacred sites. Regime forces fired anti-aircraft guns at minarets until they crumbled. The Umawi mosque in Aleppo burnt, its thousand-year-old minaret fallen, and the minaret of Deraa’s Omari mosque, erected in the seventh Century by Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab. The Khalid ibn al-Waleed mosque in Homs, built around the mausoleum of the famous Muslim general and companion of the Prophet, was shelled and burnt. In the regime’s cells, meanwhile, in a parody of the Muslim profession of faith, detainees were forced to swear that there was no god but Bashaar. Writer Samar Yazbek describes the provocation: “When the uprising began, they attacked or destroyed symbols of the Sunni religion. In Kafranbel in August 2013, every day for 20 days, when people broke their fast during Ramadan, the Assad forces used to shell them at that moment, when they were about to eat, when they were saying their prayers. They used to hear the people in the planes on the telephones saying to each other, ‘We want to make them eat death. We want to make them break their fast with death.’ And they did. This is where extremism

comes from – from violence and brutality. I am sorry, but anybody who has had ten of their children die is going to become an extremist.”

Then the drowning tyranny threw its arms around the neck of the Alawi community, advertising its complicity in its crimes and making it a potential target for revenge. The Zahra neighbourhood of Homs, for instance, was a visible affront to the besieged and shelled areas surrounding it. An Alawi community overbrimming now with soldiers, with rocket launchers set up in the square, the whole area was lit up while the rest of the city was dark. There were goods in Zahra’s shops, and very cheap furniture, clothes and electronics on sale in the ‘Sunni market’ – all looted from opposition homes. Alawi women too were encouraged to join in the repression of their neighbours – eliciting a predictable response. “They come into people’s houses and take money if they find more than a little,” complained one Sunni woman. “They steal mobile phones. They kick and punch. And what have we done to deserve this? Is it because we’re Muslims? Because we say there is no god but God? Is that why we lost our youth and our homes?”

Collective punishment for Sunnis; the collective tarring of Alawis. The most crucial of all mass-implications, and another bloody turning point in the conflict, was the series of state-directed sectarian massacres on the central plain between Homs and Hama through summer 2012. On May 25th, 108 people were murdered at Houleh, a Sunni population surrounded by Alawi and Shia villages. The victims – almost half of them children – had their throats cut, their skulls split open, and were riddled with bullets. On June 6th, between 78 and 100 were similarly murdered at al-Qubeir, again a Sunni farming area surrounded by Alawi villages. On July 10th, between 68 and 150 – both civilians and rebel fighters – were killed at Tremseh.

In these and many smaller incidents, it was the shabeeha accompanying the army who did most of the killing. In Aleppo and Damascus the shabeeha militias are manned by thugs of all backgrounds, but in the Homs, Hama and Lattakia regions they are exclusively Alawi and Shia. Using locally-recruited gangs as death squads transforms neighbouring communities into bitter enemies. The strategy is coldly intelligent; it incites the victim community with a generalised thirst for revenge, while exploiting the spectre of this revenge to frighten even dissenting members of the ‘perpetrator community’ into redoubled allegiance.

Next, the entry of Lebanon’s Hizbullah and other Iranian-backed militias gave the conflict a Sunni-Shia flavour and fitted it into a regional struggle which had flared since the American occupation of Iraq. The Shia were by no means a natural target for Syrian Sunni enmity – they constituted only one percent of the population, and before the revolution were not particularly associated with the regime. When Hizbullah was perceived as an anti-Zionist resistance force, it was wildly popular amongst Syrians, Sunnis as much as everyone else, and in 2006, when hundreds of thousands of southern Lebanese – most of them Shia – fled Israeli bombs for Syria, they were housed in private homes. Several thousand were welcomed in the border town of Qusayr.

In any case, orthodox Shia like orthodox Sunnis tend to consider the Alawis heretics. The alliance between Assadist Syria and Shia-theocratic Iran is political, not religious – but that’s not the way it felt on the ground. By word and action, Iran and its clients seemed to confirm the discourse of the wildest anti-Shia propagandists. Hizbullah’s role in Assad’s recapture of Qusayr was followed by the regime burning the Homs land registry, and then reports that Alawi families were being invited to take over Sunni homes. Sunnis feared an agenda linking Alawi tyranny and ethnic cleansing to Shia regional expansionism. The results soon began to emerge. Hizbullah secured Qusayr on June 5th 2013; and on June 11th there was a savagely sectarian response at Hatla in Deir al-Zor, where 60 Shia – some shabeeha but at least 30 civilians – were murdered.

Extract from: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robin-yassin-kassab-and-leila-al-shami-burning-country>

provides one third of Israel’s water consumption. In 1981, Eden Springs Limited (now owned by the Canadian Cott Corporation) began collecting water from Golan’s Salukia Springs, which it illegally bottles and sells in eighteen European countries. Eden Springs takes pride in its eco-friendly sustainability and advertises itself as a leader in climate action as the first carbon neutral water company supplying water to Europe. On their website, they boast, “We love the environment, that’s why we take care of it day after day in what we do. When you become a client of Eden, not only do you consume water and hydrate yourself, but you do so in an environmentally responsible way. Eden Springs directly profits from exploiting the Golan and violates Articles 28, 55, of the Hague Regulations by pillaging the Golan’s water and exporting it for profit. In 2021, the Zionist entity announced plans to double the number of settlers in Golan. In tandem with this proposal, Energix, a public company, developed a clean wind energy project to build fifty-two wind turbines on the last 5 percent of farmland owned by native Syrians. To convince Syrians of this plan, the company created a scholarship fund for the community and claimed it was bringing development via renewable energy. Energix gave Syrian farmers long, confusing contracts that promised one percent of revenues and coerced them to hand over unrestricted access to their land. Farmers were banned from publicly sharing information about their interactions with Energix. Energix calls itself “a breakthrough global green utility committed to the future of our planet.” The use of the guise of environmentalism to justify unethical land grabs in both examples are classic instances of “greenwashing.”

The Zionist entity uses discursive strategies of neoliberal progress and development to justify the colonization that uproots indigenous Syrian farmers who carry the knowledge of how to tend the land sustainably, while resisting the exploitative destruction of their waterways. It mirrors the Assad regime’s 1973 Arab Belt project, which displaced 332 Kurdish villages, and drowned 66 underwater, to build Lake Assad.⁵¹ The destruction of Kurdish lands was a form of neocolonial violence in the name of “Arab development” and “progress.” Rural, farm-working communities in Syria also experienced the systemic exploitation of their waterways by the regime and subsequent land grabs of exiled farmers. And yet Kurdish farmers reindigenize themselves by turning to their ancestral practices of belonging with the land in the face of greenwashing violence. Fela⁷ or farmworking communities displaced from their land have begun rooftop gardens.

The Technology of Apples and Roses: Earth Based Practices and Shamiya Feminism

The Golan and Syrian uprisings represent a key bridge between Syrian and Palestinian struggles that envisions a holistic, earth-based future beyond Zionist occupation, colonial fragmentation, and the failed promises of Arab regimes. Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians use their knowledge of the land to resist Zionist violence in what I argue is a Shamiya (the feminized Bilad al-Sham) feminist consciousness. Colonial and authoritarian violence in Bilad al-Sham is deeply gendered and tied to the treatment of the land. I use the term “Shamiya feminism” to do a feminist reading of earth-based liberation practices in the Golan and in Syria. Shamiya feminism would understand liberation as a reunion of land and memory in Bilad al-Sham. In imperialist, authoritarian, and patriarchal capitalist logic, land is ripe for penetration and domination—with all the symbolic connotations of the those terms. This logic carries over to the bodies of Palestinian and Syrian women, children, and men who experience sexual violation in the name of imperialist domination over the land. Syrian soldiers cut open the pregnant bellies of Palestinian women and mass raped them during the Tal al Zaatar massacre and Zionist forces routinely use rape as a settler colonial strategy.

Technologies of earth-based land practice and arts-based revolutionary work imbue Shamiya feminist consciousness. Majdal Shams is known for its apple orchards, which serve as a political symbol. Zionist exploitation of water led apple farmers to build small rainwater tanks and alternative irrigations systems to counter what they call the “rape of our groundwater.” This language reveals the indigenous Syrians’ understanding of the patriarchal nature of environmental exploitation by settler-colonial systems and imbues a Shamiya feminist consciousness of dismantling settler colonial patriarchy through reunion with earth. In the 1980s, Golani farmers hosted students from Birzeit University and showed them how to build water tanks and move soil from the valleys to the mountains to grow apples. Such educational projects reveal an understanding of indigenous earth-based knowledge as critical for Palestinian

resistance. The Zionist entity announced plans to establish 750 new farming estates for settlers in order to “create anchors” in Golan using “clean-wind technology.” To do so, they bulldozed the apple orchards in the Buq’ata villages. One farmer says, “Apples were and are and will be a symbol of the Golan Heights. We are attached to the apples and apples are also attached to us.” Another farmer writes, “Our connection with mother earth is so deep and strong, we can’t leave our homeland.” And yet in 2024 the Israeli water company Mekorot is pumping all of the water Syrians use for their apple orchards, causing 20 million dollars of damage to the Syrian farmers’ apple market to make way for settlers. Syrians’ relationships to waterways, apple orchards, and the earth itself as an extension of the body move beyond anthropocentric resistance and expand to anticapitalist, border-defying Shamiya feminist modes of relating that imagine the body, the family, and the flesh as home itself—a home with roots so deep they cannot be cut.

Syria and roses have a long, poetic history. The eternal *rosa damascena* or damask rose is a beloved “plancestor” in the region. During the early Syrian uprisings, protestors in Deraa, Darayya, Baniyas, and elsewhere held roses and water bottles to the sky. The story of these roses is critical to understanding the Syrian Revolution. Baniyas, a coastal city in Syria was one of the first cities to use roses in protest in March 2011. In Darayya, a small town on the outskirts of Damascus, the Coordination Committee of Darayya (CCD)—often known as the “Peaceful Youth of Darayya”—encouraged youth to bring roses to protests.

A formerly imprisoned youth activist, Yahya Shirbaji, said “Darayya itself is in need of roses. The revolution is an opportunity for us to change too.” Shirbaji and other protestors including Ahmad Helmi, Islam Dabbas, and Ghiyath Mattar stayed up late nights writing messages on water bottles with roses that read, “We are all Syrians... why are you killing us?” Razan Zeitouneh, a Syrian activist who was later disappeared by extremist forces she critiqued, wrote about Darayya’s youth and their roses, which were handed to soldiers. The roses created slippage in the moment of state violence: armed Syrian soldiers could not understand why they were given roses, and the pause ruptured the theater of oppression in which soldiers intimidate protestors before killing them. Dabbas described this moment, “as the moment of flight, the moment of lighting the flame, when he broke with everything that had gone before and became part of a larger spirit.” On July 22, 2011, the Friday of National Unity, Dabbas carried an armful of roses to soldiers. This time the roses did not rupture the moment—he was seized, and imprisoned. Years later, his family discovered he had been executed. Shirbaji was arrested on September 6, 2011, and executed after four months of torture. Regime forces kidnapped Ghiyath Mattar on August 9, 2011, and tortured him—they left his body on his mother’s doorstep for his pregnant wife to find.

Later on, Syrian women such as Rima Dali launched movements such as Stop the Killing: We Want to Build a Syria for All Syrians, that echoed Darayya’s youth and their insistence on a revolution of roses, by handing out white and red roses to passersby with messages of antisectarianism. Carrying roses in the face of immense state violence reveals a web of earth-based relations—a Shamiya feminist consciousness as a creative confrontation against oppression, in which the roses themselves carry the message of resistance.

The residents of Golan, with their long history of anticolonial resistance and eco-revolts against Zionist settler-colonial greenwashing, made clear their stance on Assad during the Arab Spring. In 2011, the residents of occupied Golan declared solidarity with the Syrian uprisings in a statement called “You are the Voice and We Its Echo.” Local residents also created a Facebook page called *Tansiqiyat al Thawra as Soriya fi al Jawlan Asoori Almuhtall* (Activities of the Syrian Revolution in the Occupied Syrian Golan) and a YouTube channel for publishing anti-Assad protests in Golan. Throughout Syria, protests for Palestine were woven into the grassroots uprisings. In December 2017, rural people in Jassim protested Trump’s decision to recognize the Israeli embassy in Jerusalem. While raising the Syrian Revolution’s flag, they raised signs of Palestine, saying “Jerusalem is our bride,” and burned American and Israeli flags. In Syria, protestors have held fundraisers, organized choirs to sing songs for Palestine, created a sculpture for Gaza in Idlib’s main square, painted murals, burned the Israeli flag, and held countless protests for Palestine. In Idlib, where protestors resist the extremist occupation of Hay Tahrir al-Sham, Turkey, and Assad and Russian airstrikes, journalist Hadi Abdullah declared “our prayers and hearts and minds are with you Gaza. Because we know more than anyone what bombing is, what it means to have your house fall on you and your family’s’ heads. We know more than anyone what it means to lose someone you love. And because we know these things, we pray for you night and day.”⁸

The act of forgiving (and forgetting)

Leila Al Shami (4.8.17)

Forgive (Verb):

- Stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw, or mistake.*
- No longer feel angry about or wish to punish (an offence, flaw, or mistake).*

[Oxford online dictionary]

For six years Assad has waged a campaign of extermination against a people who rose for freedom. His crimes have been so well documented, by both testimony and photographic evidence, that the international community is left in little doubt that this man, and his regime, have perpetrated atrocities on such a scale that they amount to crimes against humanity.

Yet today there are few voices within the international community that are calling for Assad’s departure. The focus is now on regime preservation, ‘stability’ and the ever-expanding ‘War on Terror’. It seems that the crimes of the tyrant can be forgiven, forgotten, erased from history. That he can keep the throne he destroyed a country for.

We shouldn’t be surprised that those in power protect the interests of the powerful. Or that there was never any real support for a popular movement that brought a state to its knees. Even those ‘Friends of Syria’, who spent millions on their five-star conferences as the country burned, were only ever motivated by their own interests and agendas. Welcome to the theatre of the absurd.

But forgiving, and forgetting, are luxuries not afforded to those who have lost everything. It’s much easier to be a ‘neutral observer’ from the outside. For millions of Syrians, the political is personal and the wounds of war will not be easily healed. Memories forged from pain are not so easily effaced.

You forget. The brutality of this regime did not begin in 2011. The totalitarian state was founded by Assad père. It was he who built the Kingdom of Silence and Terror where all dissent was ruthlessly crushed. Thousands of political opponents disappeared into the Syrian gulag. Many never got out. Those that did were often a shell of their former selves, ghosts amongst the living, broken by the torture, by the horror. And then there was Hama, the city razed to the ground in 1982 to quell an insurgency. Thousands – mainly civilians – lost their lives at the hands of Assad’s army. The viciousness of this repression kept Syrians silent, humiliated, until Mohamed Bouazizi – a Tunisian – ignited the hopes of a new generation.

When Bashar inherited the dictatorship from his father little changed except for the cosmetics of discourse. ‘Modernization’ and ‘development’ were the new buzzwords – but the regime kept people impoverished politically, economically and culturally. Bashar’s neo-liberal reforms benefited the crony capitalist class – who amassed their wealth through connections and corruption, pillaging and plundering a country they saw as their own personal fiefdom – holding the masses in perpetual contempt. Bashar had no wish to reform the fascist nature of the Syrian state. Imprisonment of regime critics, torture and enforced disappearance remained wide-spread. Syrians will not forget.

The revolution fostered such great hopes for change. And those hopes were crushed and shattered into a million pieces mirroring the fragments of a bleeding nation that descended into chaos and war. The regime’s barbarisms – and new barbarisms – were unleashed on a scale no one could have predicted and no one could contain. And in the international community’s acquiescence to the Syrian regime’s crimes, obscene levels of violence meted out by a state against rebelling citizens have become normalized. The ramifications will be felt not only by Syrians, but by all.

What does forgiveness look like for a mother who has pulled her child – piece by bloodied piece – from the ruins of her smoldering home? What does forgiveness look like for those who struggled to identify the tortured corpse of a loved one? For those who will now live a life of poverty and exile, severed from their homeland, their memories, and their dreams? Will forgetting come easily? Or will they be consumed by grief, rage and a desire for revenge?

Dreams are haunted by friends and heroes that are no longer here. What were their thoughts in their dying moments? Did they regret daring to dream that the impossible was possible? Did they cry out for their mothers as their bodies were racked by pain and cast aside? How did they feel as they were being brutalized – transformed from a human being – with all their hopes and fears – into just another statistic? Is it possible to forgive, to forget?

There is one thing that unites all Syrians, regardless of their political views: a feeling of immense pain and loss. And no doubt some element of forgiveness will be necessary to heal the wounds of a fractured nation. But it is hard to see how the country can move forward when the man and the regime responsible for this horror remain in place. The political leaders who presided over and directed this descent into barbarity must be held accountable for their crimes. As the slogan has it, ‘no justice, no peace’.

https://eilashami.wordpress.com/2017/08/04/the-act-of-forgiving-and-forgetting/

Militarization and Liberation

Leila Al Shami, Robin Yassin-Kassab(2016)

In the months and years that followed... militarization—more specifically the scramble for weapons and funds—transformed the revolution from a leaderless movement into a cacophony of a thousand competing leaders, from horizontalism to a jostle of hierarchies—though horizontally organized committees and councils continued to work, and their work, increasingly focussed on basic community survival, became even more crucial in the absence not only of the state but sometimes of any infrastructure whatsoever. Furthermore, women’s role in the revolution was increasingly marginalized. Although women—particularly Kurds—did sometimes take up arms, they were largely excluded from the military struggle—a male hegemonic domain—and the civil struggle became much less visible, although no less important. As indiscipline and opportunist criminality tainted the resistance, and later as jihadism flourished, the regime found an excuse for its already steadily escalating violence, and gradually persuaded many at home and abroad that its survival was the least worst option for Syria and the region.

Still, abstract criticisms of the revolution’s militarization miss the point. Syria’s revolutionaries didn’t make a formal collective decision to pick up arms—quite the opposite; rather, a million individual decisions were made under fire. Yassin Swehat puts it like this: “It wasn’t a choice. Look at Homs. When thousands are praying in a square, peaceful, unarmed, and they are shot at, murdered—What do you expect to happen next?”

Violence has its own inevitable momentum. When residential areas are subjected to military attack, when neighborhoods experience the horror of children tortured to death, when young men are randomly rounded up and beaten, soon they will respond. Before moving on to media work, Ziad Homsî, a thin man with an intellectual demeanor, fought in Douma, in the Damascus suburbs: “It was a matter of self-defense. Everyone defended his own home, his own alley. Brigades were formed by the residents of one neighborhood, or by a group of men who worked together. It was a spontaneous process.”

According to Assaad al-Achi, the threat of sexual violence in particular pushed people towards arms. “Syria is very much a conservative, traditional society. Rape is something that will outrage the people. It is very emotional for them... By December 2011 rape had become a standard practice not only in prisons but by the army as well. When it went into towns, the first thing [soldiers] did was go into homes and start raping women in front of their fathers, brothers and husbands.”

But perhaps the greatest of all motivators for the armed struggle were traumatization and the thirst for vengeance. When AbdulRahman al-Jalloud left prison he continued to pursue civil revolutionary activities, but he puts this down to his prior political awareness and contacts. Those young men without such a background responded to their torments in a more concrete manner: “Ninety per cent of detainees picked up arms as soon as they were released. They had very personal reasons. The fighters I know, their houses were burned, their relatives killed, they were on the run.”

support for the Palestinian/Muslim/leftist alliance, intervened, but on the side of the pro-Israel Maronite Falangists to defeat the Palestinian/Muslim/Leftist alliance? Or could it be because throughout the 1980s the Assad regime slaughtered tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians in camps in Lebanon, most notably at Tel Za’atar? Perhaps it’s because the regime under Bashar utterly destroyed Yarmouk camp, until then Syria’s most important centre of Palestinian culture. Or because the regime tortured and starved so many Palestinians to death during the Syrian Revolution. Or maybe Assadist Palestinians love the regime because its reign has seen all of Syria parceled out to foreign powers – Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, the Turkish-Kurdish PKK, as well as the part it had already handed to Israel. Perhaps they believe the destruction of Syria’s cities, the murder of a million Syrians, and the expulsion of millions more, will in the end hasten the liberation of Palestine.

I should say that most Palestinians sympathise with the revolutionary Syrian people and not with the regime (and its allies) killing them. The more working class and more religious the Palestinian, the more this is the case (in my experience). And among liberal middle class activists there are many decent people who have shown solidarity with Syrians. Here’s a great statement by some of them from 2016. But some of the signatories were ostracised by other Palestinians for signing. Amongst the West Bank middle classes, including not a few faux-intellectuals, there’s plenty of Assadism. There’s also, for God’s sake, the statue of Saddam Hussein at Bir Zeit.

Why is it that this kind of Palestinian, the very kind who in previous decades we might have considered as being at the forefront of radical politics in the Arab world, has become enmeshed in such backward and inhumane modes of thought? It might be because the Palestinians haven’t experienced the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring. This isn’t really their fault. They are stuck with the old nationalist narratives because they are stuck with a foreign occupation. Whereas their neighbours have moved on to postcolonial struggles. The foreign occupations have gone (or had gone, before Assad brought them back), so the struggle now is against those gangsters who seized control of the weakened countries the colonialists left behind.

The Palestinians, through no fault of their own, are stuck in a previous age, and some therefore have got stuck in old, already-disproved stories. But those stuck should unstick themselves, for their own sakes. Because the ‘strong men’ of the Arab states have done nothing to help Palestinians. How many more decades of failure will it take to understand that these strong men are only strong against the suffering Arabs in the countries they’re looting? Saddam Hussein broke some bricks in Tel Aviv. Hooray. He also broke Iraq, killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and created the conditions for American invasion and Iranian dominance.

The strong men that make their countries weak will never help. The Arab peoples – who genuinely support Palestinian rights – might, if only they’re liberated to do what they can, by word and deed, by organisation. Like Tal al-Mallouhi, a Syrian teenager who blogged in support of Palestine. A young girl encouraging her society to do what it could to help Palestinians. The regime threw her in prison in 2009. Syrian prisons are a thousand times worse than Israeli prisons. She’s still there. A hundred times I must have heard a Palestinian bitterly complaining that the Arabs don’t do enough for their cause, and I’ve usually agreed. But the problem here is with the regimes which lock up girls who blog for Palestine, not with the girls themselves.

How do you expect your Arab brothers and sisters to support your cause when you support the tyrants and foreign imperialists who are killing them? Most Arabs, especially Syrians, do support the Palestinian cause, despite these faux-intellectual monsters. Of course, not only Palestinians are guilty. There are those who want democracy in Syria but love the memory of Saddam in Iraq. There are those who want freedom for Bahrain but not for Syria. There are those who want voting rights, but not for the poor who might vote for Islamists. Solidarity between peoples is what will give us strength. Only when we all want freedom for everybody without exception will we will achieve it. So long as we accept the subjugation of any people or any individual, we will all be subjugated.

https://qunfuz.com/2023/03/05/palestinian-assadists/

Revolution Reborn

Leila Al Shami (26.8.23)

Yesterday, 25 August 2023, the revolution flag flew high in villages, towns and cities across Syria. In Sweida, Dera’a, Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, Hasakeh and Deir Al Zour, thousands were on the streets reviving the chants of the revolution.

Protests erupted in the south of the country a few days ago, in regime-held Sweida and Dera’a. They were triggered by the cost-of-living crisis, especially the recent increase in fuel prices as subsidies were cut. People are struggling to meet their basic needs – one of the reasons many are still fleeing the country. More than 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and half of the population are food insecure. A Syrian state employee currently earns around \$10 per month, no where near enough to provide for a family as basic food items spiral in price. It is the regime which has brought the country to ruin. Protests triggered by socio-economic demands soon escalated to renewed calls for Assad’s downfall.

In Druze-majority Sweida the clerical establishment has voiced support for the protests, signaling a shift in a region which has previously maintained a position of neutrality through the revolution. Druze protesters sang revolutionary songs “Syria is ours, not Assad’s”, they chanted. They also chanted the anti-sectarian slogan “one, one, one, the Syrian people are one” and Bedouin Sunni tribesmen joined them sending a clear message of unity in spite of the regime’s ongoing attempt to ferment sectarian division. One symbolic demonstration raised a revolution flag at the tomb of Sultan Prasha Al Atrash, a Druze hero of the anti-colonial struggle against the French. Syrians are once again struggling for national liberation – from a criminal regime which has no popular legitimacy.

Since 16 August more than 52 locations in the south have witnessed protests and other acts of civil disobedience. On 20August a general strike led by public transport drivers, which also saw shops and businesses close, was widely observed. A number of regime buildings have been attacked. On Wednesday, angry protestors ransacked the local offices of the Baath Party in Sweida. In addition to deteriorating living conditions protesters also voiced their rage against rampant corruption and called for a crackdown on the drugs trade. Warlords and regime cronies have been amassing wealth and power through smuggling the amphetamine-like Captagon, which has led to a deteriorating security situation in the south.

On Friday, protests spread around the country with people taking to the streets under the banner “Friday of Accountability for Assad”. In scenes reminiscent of the early days of the revolution, women and men from all different social backgrounds were calling for the fall of the regime. Many chants and banners also demanded Assad’s imperial backers – Russia and Iran – leave. Protestors in the north chanted in solidarity with their compatriots in the south. In Idlib, and Atarib in the Aleppo countryside, the flags of the Druze and Kurdish communities were raised alongside the revolution flag. And there were numerous displays of solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance. In the camp of Mashhad Ruhin in Idlib where people displaced by Assad’s terror now live, the crowds gathered and chanted “the people want the fall of the regime”. Children, who were not even born when Syria’s revolution began, knew the words to every revolutionary song. Even members of the Alawite community, Assad’s loyalist base, have been taking to social media in recent days voicing their anger at the regime which has destroyed the country.

In Sweida women led protests calling for the release of political prisoners – a key demand of all Free Syrians. More than 130,000 individuals have been detained or forcibly disappeared by the regime since 2011. Posters demanded the release of Ayman Fares, a son of Lattakia, who released a video which went viral a few days ago criticizing the regime and was arrested whilst trying to flee to Sweida. The regime deals with dissent in the only way it knows – with severe repression. In both Aleppo and Dera’a there have been reports of security forces firing on protestors with two civilians reported killed in Al-Fardous neighborhood of Aleppo city. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that 57 civilians have been arrested in connection with the protests over the last few days. And the bombing has not stopped. Just this morning regime and Russian warplanes targeted two schools in Idlib province – continuing their relentless campaign against civilians safe in the knowledge that the

international community will fail to meaningfully respond to ongoing war crimes.

In recent days coordinated campaigns have appeared on social media with a list of demands and calls to protest. One is the 10 August Movement which, amongst other things, calls for the establishment of a transitional government in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), an end to sectarian division, an end to foreign occupation and external intervention, the release of all detainees and the prosecution of war criminals.

These courageous women and men across the country have shown that the regime cannot bomb, starve, torture, gas and rape the Syrian people into submission. Despite everything they have been through, and in the absence of meaningful solidarity with their struggle, the dream of a free Syria is alive. The world may choose to normalize with Assad, but Free Syrians have time and again made clear they will never accept his rule.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2023/08/26/revolution-reborn/>

Building alternative futures in the present: the case of Syria’s communes

by *Leila Al Shami (18.3.21)*

“We are no less than the Paris commune workers: they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half.” Omar Aziz, 2012

On 18 March 2021 people around the globe will be commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. On this date, ordinary men and women claimed power for themselves, took control of their city and ran their own affairs independently from the state for over two months before being crushed in a Bloody Week by the French government in Versailles. The Communards’ experiment in autonomous, democratic self-organisation, as a means to both resist state tyranny and to create a radical alternative to it, holds an important place in the collective imaginary and has provided inspiration for generations of revolutionaries.

On 18 March another anniversary will pass, but surely to much less acclaim worldwide. On this date a decade ago, large scale protests were held in the southern Syrian city of Dera’a in response to the arrest and torture of a group of school children who had painted anti-government graffiti on a wall. Security forces opened fire on the protesters, killing at least four, provoking wide-spread public anger. Over the next few days protests spread across the country, transforming into a revolutionary movement demanding freedom from the four-decade dictatorship of the Assad regime. In the following years, as people took up arms and forced the state to retreat from their communities, Syrians engaged in remarkable experiments in autonomous self-organisation despite the brutality of the counter-revolution unleashed upon them. As early as 2012, Omar Aziz a Syrian economist, public intellectual and anarchist dissident, compared the first of these experiments to the Paris Commune.

Omar Aziz was not a mere bystander to the events underway in Syria. Living and working in exile, he returned to his native Damascus in 2011, at the age of 63, to participate in the insurrection against the regime. He became involved in revolutionary organizing and providing assistance to families displaced from the Damascus suburbs under regime assault. Aziz was inspired by the movement’s level of self-organisation in its resistance to the regime. In towns and neighbourhoods across the country, revolutionaries had formed local coordinating committees. These were horizontally organised forums through which they would plan protests and share information regarding both the accomplishments of the revolution and the brutal repression the movement faced. They promoted non-violent civil disobedience and were inclusive to women and men from all social, religious and ethnic groups. Revolutionaries were also organising the provision of food baskets to those in need and setting up medical centres to tend to injured protesters who feared going to hospitals due to risk of arrest.

Aziz believed that whilst such activities were an important means to resist the regime and had indeed challenged its authority, they did not go far enough. Through their organisation, revolutionaries were developing new relationships independently of the state based on solidarity, cooperation and

mutual aid, yet were still dependent on the state for most of their needs, including employment, food, education, and healthcare. This reality enabled the regime to maintain its legitimacy and perpetuate its power despite people’s wide-spread opposition to it. In two papers published in October 2011 and February 2012, when the revolution was still largely peaceful and most of the Syrian territory remained under regime-control, Aziz began advocating for the establishment of Local Councils. He saw these as grass-roots forums through which people could collaborate collectively to address their needs, gain full autonomy from the state, and achieve individual and community freedom from structures of domination. He believed that building autonomous, self-governing communes, linked regionally and nationally through a network of cooperation and mutual aid, was the path towards social revolution. According to Aziz, “the more self-organizing is able to spread ... the more the revolution will have laid the groundwork for victory.”

Aziz was not concerned with seizing state power and did not advocate for a vanguard party to lead the revolution. Like the Communards, he believed in the innate ability of people to govern themselves without the need for coercive authority. In his view the new self-organised social formations that were emerging would “allow people to take autonomous control over their own lives, to demonstrate that this autonomy is what freedom is made of.” Aziz envisaged that the role of the Local Councils would be to support and deepen this process of independence from state institutions. Their priority would be working together with other popular initiatives to ensure the fulfilment of basic needs such as access to housing, education and healthcare; collecting information on the fate of detainees and providing support to their families; coordinating with humanitarian organisations; defending land from expropriation by the state; supporting and developing economic and social activities; and coordinating with recently formed Free Army militias to ensure security and community defence. For Aziz, the most powerful form of resistance to the state was a refusal to collaborate with it through building alternatives in the present that prefigured an emancipatory future.

In November 2012, much like so many of Syria’s revolutionaries, Omar Aziz was arrested and died in prison a short while later. Yet, before his arrest, he helped found four local councils in the working class suburbs of Damascus. The first was in Zabadani, an agricultural and touristic town surrounded by mountains, some 50 kilometres from the capital. The town was quick to join the uprising in March 2011, holding regular demonstrations calling for freedom and the release of detainees. By June, young men and women had formed a local coordination committee to organize demonstrations and carry out media work to communicate what was happening in the town to the outside world. Like the female Communards of Paris, the women of Zabadani also created their own forums. In mid- 2011 the Collective of Zabadani Female Revolutionaries was formed. They participated in demonstrations in huge numbers and called for peaceful civil disobedience. They played a leading role in the Dignity Strike in December 2011, a nation-wide general strike that attempted to place economic pressure on the regime. In January 2012 they established Oxygen Magazine, a bi-monthly printed magazine providing analysis of the revolution and promoting peaceful resistance. The group later evolved into the Damma women’s network, which continues to work to support women to build resilience and alleviate the impact of violence in conflict affected communities, as well as providing education and psychological support for children.

Zabadani was liberated by local Free Army militias in January 2012. Barricades were set up and the town was brought under the control of its residents. A local council was established to fill the vacuum created by the regime’s departure. The town’s Sunni and Christian residents came together to elect the council’s 28 members from respected individuals within the community and to choose a president. This was Syria’s first experience of democracy in decades. The council established a number of departments to administer daily civil life, including for health care and humanitarian assistance, as well as a political committee involved in negotiating with the regime, and a court to resolve local conflicts. A military committee supervised the Free Army battalions to ensure security. Whilst the council representatives were all men, the Collective of Zabadani Female Revolutionaries played an important role in supporting the Council’s activities. Like the Communards of Paris, the people of Zabadani, who dreamt of a free and just society, managed to creatively self-organise their community independently from centralized state control.

Local autonomy and grass roots democracy was seen by the regime as its greatest threat. As the government of Versailles, which had refused to fight

supported by foreign bombs, and who are fighting, by and large, Syrian-born rebels and civilians. How many would consider their own *elected* government legitimate if it began carrying out mass rape campaigns against dissidents? It’s only the complete dehumanization of Syrians that makes such a position even possible. It’s a racism that sees Syrians as incapable of achieving, let alone deserving, anything better than one of the most brutal dictatorships of our time.

For this authoritarian left, support is extended to the Assad regime in the name of ‘anti-imperialism’. Assad is seen as part of the ‘axis of resistance’ against both US Empire and Zionism. It matters little that the Assad regime itself supported the first Gulf war, or participated in the US illegal rendition programme where suspected terrorists were tortured in Syria on the CIA’s behalf. The fact that this regime probably holds the dubious distinction of slaughtering more Palestinians than the Israeli state is constantly overlooked, as is the fact that it’s more intent on using its armed forces to suppress internal dissent than to liberate the Israeli-occupied Golan.

This ‘anti-imperialism’ of idiots is one which equates imperialism with the actions of the US alone. They seem unaware that the US has been bombing Syria since 2014. In its campaign to liberate Raqqa from Daesh all international norms of war and considerations of proportionality were abandoned. Over 1,000 civilians were killed and the UN estimates that 80 per cent of the city is now uninhabitable. There were no protests organized by leading ‘anti-war’ organizations against this intervention, no calls to ensure that civilians and civilian infrastructure were protected. Instead they adopted the ‘War on Terror’ discourse, once the preserve of neo-cons, now promulgated by the regime, that all opposition to Assad are jihadi terrorists. They turned a blind eye to Assad filling his gulag with thousands of secular, peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrators for death by torture, whilst releasing militant-Islamists from prison. Similarly, the continuing protests held in liberated areas in opposition to extremist and authoritarian groups such as Daesh, Nusra and Ahrar Al Sham have been ignored. Syrians are not seen as possessing the sophistication to hold a diverse range of views. Civil society activists (including many amazing women), citizen journalists, humanitarian workers are irrelevant. The entire opposition is reduced to its most authoritarian elements or seen as mere conduits for foreign interests.

This pro-fascist left seems blind to any form of imperialism that is non-western in origin. It combines identity politics with egoism. Everything that happens is viewed through the prism of what it means for westerners – only white men have the power to make history. According to the Pentagon there are currently around 2000 American troops in Syria. The US has established a number of military bases in the Kurdish-controlled north for the first time in Syria’s history. This should concern anyone who supports Syrian self-determination yet pales in comparison to the tens of thousands of Iranian troops and Iranian backed Shia militias which are now occupying large parts of the country, or the murderous bombing raids carried out by the Russian air force in support of the fascist dictatorship. Russia has now established permanent military bases in the country, and has been handed exclusive rights over Syria’s oil and gas as a reward for its support. Noam Chomsky once argued that Russia’s intervention could not be considered imperialism because it was invited to bomb the country by the Syrian regime. By that analysis, the US’s intervention in Vietnam was not imperialism either, invited as it was by the South-Vietnamese government.

A number of anti-war organizations have justified their silence on Russian and Iranian interventions by arguing that ‘the main enemy is at home’. This excuses them from undertaking any serious power analysis to determine who the main actors driving the war actually are. For Syrians the main enemy is indeed at home – it’s Assad who is engaging in what the UN has termed ‘the crime of extermination’. Without being aware of their own contradictions many of the same voices have been vocally opposed (and rightly so) to Israel’s current assault on peaceful demonstrators in Gaza. Of course, one of the main ways imperialism works is to deny native voices. In this vein, leading western anti-war organizations hold conferences on Syria without inviting any Syrian speakers.

The other major political trend to have thrown its weight behind the Assad regime and organize against US, UK and French strikes on Syria is the far right. Today, the discourse of fascists and these ‘anti-imperialist leftists’ is virtually indistinguishable. In the US, white supremacist Richard Spencer, alt right podcaster Mike Enoch and anti-immigration activist Ann Coulter are all

opposing US strikes. In the UK former BNP leader Nick Griffin and Islamophobe Katie Hopkins join the calls. The place where the alt-right and alt-left frequently converge is around promoting various conspiracy theories to absolve the regime of its crimes. They claim chemical massacres are false flags or that rescue workers are Al Qaeda and therefore legitimate targets for attack. Those spreading such reports are not on the ground in Syria and are unable to independently verify their claims. They are often dependent on Russian or Assad state propaganda outlets because they ‘don’t trust the MSM’ or Syrians directly affected. Sometimes the convergence of these two seemingly opposite strands of the political spectrum turns into outright collaboration. The ANSWER coalition, which is organizing many of the demonstrations against a strike on Assad in the US, has such a history. Both strands frequently promote Islamophobic and anti-Semitic narratives. Both share the same talking points and same memes.

There are many valid reasons for opposing external military intervention in Syria, whether it be by the US, Russia, Iran or Turkey. None of these states are acting in the interests of the Syrian people, democracy or human rights. They act solely in their own interests. The US, UK and French intervention today is less about protecting Syrians from mass-atrocity and more about enforcing an international norm that chemical weapons use is unacceptable, lest one day they be used on westerners themselves. More foreign bombs will not bring about peace and stability. There’s little appetite to force Assad from power which would contribute to ending the worst of the atrocities. Yet in opposing foreign intervention, one needs to come up with an alternative to protect Syrians from slaughter. It’s morally objectionable to say the least to expect Syrians to just shut up and die to protect the higher principle of ‘anti-imperialism’. Many alternatives to foreign military intervention have been proposed by Syrians time and again and have been ignored. And so the question remains, when diplomatic options have failed, when a genocidal regime is protected from censure by powerful international backers, when no progress is made in stopping daily bombing, ending starvation sieges or releasing prisoners who are being tortured on an industrial scale, what can be done.

I no longer have an answer. I’ve consistently opposed all foreign military intervention in Syria, supported Syrian led process to rid their country of a tyrant and international processes grounded in efforts to protect civilians and human rights and ensure accountability for all actors responsible for war-crimes. A negotiated settlement is the only way to end this war – and still seems as distant as ever. Assad (and his backers) are determined to thwart any process, pursue a total military victory and crush any remaining democratic alternative. Hundreds of Syrians are being killed every week in the most barbaric ways imaginable. Extremist groups and ideologies are thriving in the chaos wrought by the state. Civilians continue to flee in their thousands as legal processes – such as Law No.10 – are implemented to ensure they will never return to their homes. The international system itself is collapsing under the weight of its own impotence. The words ‘Never Again’ ring hollow. There’s no major people’s movement which stands in solidarity with the victims. They are instead slandered, their suffering is mocked or denied, and their voices either absent from discussions or questioned by people far away, who know nothing of Syria, revolution or war, and who arrogantly believe they know what is best. It is this desperate situation which causes many Syrians to welcome the US, UK and France’s action and who now see foreign intervention as their only hope, despite the risks they know it entails.

One thing is for sure – I won’t lose any sleep over targeted strikes aimed at regime military bases and chemical weapons plants which may provide Syrians with a short respite from the daily killing. And I will never see people who place grand narratives over lived realities, who support brutal regimes in far off countries, or who peddle racism, conspiracy theories and atrocity denial, as allies.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2018/04/14/the-anti-imperialism-of-idiots/>

together with the US in the fight against ISIS and are now in control over a large territory in the north and east of the country, have been abandoned. Without US backing, they are unlikely to maintain a presence in Arab majority areas in eastern Syria, and Trump’s announcement sent waves of families fleeing SDF controlled towns in the Deir Al Zour countryside towards opposition controlled areas in the north. They fear that the regime and Iranian militias will take over and enact retribution on those perceived as dissidents. Protests have broken out against the SDF in Manbij, Tabqa and Mansoura. People are angered by SDF negotiations with the regime, as well as long-standing resentments relating to a lack of adequate service provision, arbitrary arrests and forced conscription. Some have called upon Turkey to intervene to protect them. There is also the fear of ISIS resurgence. Despite Trump’s boast that the terror group had been defeated, the war continues. On 18 January, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that International Coalition war planes killed at least 15 civilians, including six children, in Al Baghouz Tahtani villiage in Deir Al Zour.

In Kurdish majority areas, the fears are different. Turkey, long an enemy of Kurdish autonomy both at home and abroad, has announced its intention to intervene to establish a ‘safe-zone’ in the north-east of the country. Turkey’s main aim in Syria, having long since abandoned rebels in the fight against the regime, has been to prevent Kurdish control along its border and establish an area to return Syrian refugees to, some 3.5 million of which are currently residing in Turkey. Last year, Turkish and allied rebel forces took over Afrin, a Kurdish majority area formerly under the control of the PYD, which Turkey considers a terrorist group for its links to the PKK. The occupying forces have carried out obscene acts of violence against the local population including the looting of Kurdish homes and businesses, forced displacement, kidnappings, assassinations and rape. Kurdish leaders have rejected the idea of an expanded Turkish presence and instead have requested international protection. Without this, they may be faced with little choice but to negotiate the return of regime control and therefore place their faith in those that Kurds in their thousands rose up to over-throw in 2011.

Elsewhere the situation is no better. In January, the powerful hard-line Islamist group Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) declared war on rebel groups and captured much of opposition held territory in Idlib, parts of Aleppo and Hama. The HTS-affiliated Salvation Government, which has been accused of corruption, imposing hard-line Islamist rule, wide-spread arrests and arbitrary killing of opponents (both civil activists and rebel fighters) is attempting to take over all civil institutions. Local councils, Free Syria Police Forces, university students and medical workers have protested such attempts, stressing their independence and neutrality from any armed group. Western donors have withdrawn funding for civil society activities and humanitarian aid, fearing it may end up in HTS hands – a designated terrorist group – leaving the health care system and provision for internally displaced Syrians currently facing severe winter storms, on the brink of collapse. With HTS now in control, Assad and Russia may break the cease-fire deal and justify an attack on the province in the name of the War on Terror, with disastrous consequences for the three million civilians who reside there. As I write, regime shells rain down on the small town of Maarat Al-Nu’man, famed for its resistance to both the Assad regime and HTS, leaving casualties and destruction in their wake.

Despite many countries desire to rid themselves of their ‘refugee problem’ by suggesting that stability is returning; the situation in regime-controlled areas is also catastrophic. In Deraa in the south, and eastern Ghouta near Damascus, the return of the regime has meant a return of ‘the Kingdom of Silence and Fear.’ There are ongoing mass arrest campaigns and forced conscription to regime forces (despite amnesty deals which accompanied the ‘reconciliation’ process for those who chose to stay rather than be forcibly displaced from their homes). Resistance to the regime has re-emerged in Deraa including protests, graffiti and assassinations of pro-regime fighters and local figures that were involved in the reconciliation process and are now accused of betrayal. The living conditions in these areas are desperate as both international and local NGOs which provided services and employment opportunities in the face of local economic collapse, ceased operations following the regime take over. In regime-controlled Aleppo and Damascus, shortages of gas, oil and electricity and the monopolization of goods and services by regime militia who are charging exorbitant prices, has led to widespread public criticism of the regime even among its loyalist support base. Many Syrians who fled or were forcibly displaced from their homes, fear not only arrest if they return, but that

they no longer have homes to return to. Laws have been put in place to expropriate property in formally rebel-held communities, and transfer it to loyalist hands under the pretext of reconstruction and development. The working class suburbs which were hotbeds of resistance are to be turned over to luxury malls and high end development, providing homes for those whose loyalty to the regime is not in question.

For many Syrians there can be no stability, much less peace, while those responsible for the country’s destruction remain in power. In recent months Syrian families have been learning the terrible fate of their loved ones, as the regime has issued death notices to civil registries of thousands of people who have been killed in regime detention. Many of those killed were activists arrested in 2011 and 2012 including non-violent advocate Yahya Shurbaji and his brother Ma’an who were among 1,000 people from Daraya tortured to death in jail. Another executed was Layla Shweikani, a young woman from Chicago who travelled to Syria to help those displaced by the conflict and was detained in Damascus in 2016. Tens of thousands of Syrians remain detained or disappeared. Syrians continue to demand justice and accountability for all those responsible for war crimes and mass human rights violations, yet the world seems increasingly impervious to their calls.

In Syria, and elsewhere in the region, revolutionary uprisings and inspiring experiments in grass roots democracy have been crushed by counter-revolutionary forces. Yet popular anger has not dissipated. None of the factors which caused the uprisings have been resolved and the situation has deteriorated socially, politically and economically. Peace and freedom remain as elusive as ever.

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/403-spring-2019/the-syrian-quagmire/>

The ‘anti-imperialism’ of idiots

Leila Al Shami (14.4.18)

Once more the western ‘anti-war’ movement has awoken to mobilise around Syria. This is the third time since 2011. The first was when Obama contemplated striking the Syrian regime’s military capability (but didn’t) following chemical attacks on the Ghouta in 2013, considered a ‘red line’. The second time was when Donald Trump ordered a strike which hit an empty regime military base in response to chemical attacks on Khan Sheikhou in 2017. And today, as the US, UK and France take limited military action (targeted strikes on regime military assets and chemical weapons facilities) following a chemical weapons attack in Douma which killed at least 34 people, including many children who were sheltering in basements from bombing.

The first thing to note from the three major mobilisations of the western ‘anti-war’ left is that they have little to do with ending the war. More than half a million Syrians have been killed since 2011. The vast majority of civilian deaths have been through the use of conventional weapons and 94 per cent of these victims were killed by the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance. There is no outrage or concern feigned for this war, which followed the regime’s brutal crackdown on peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrators. There’s no outrage when barrel bombs, chemical weapons and napalm are dropped on democratically self-organized communities or target hospitals and rescue workers. Civilians are expendable; the military capabilities of a genocidal, fascist regime are not. In fact the slogan ‘Hands off Syria’ really means ‘Hands off Assad’ and support is often given for Russia’s military intervention. This was evident yesterday at a demonstration organized by Stop the War UK where a number of regime and Russian flags were shamefully on display.

This left exhibits deeply authoritarian tendencies, one that places states themselves at the centre of political analysis. Solidarity is therefore extended to states (seen as the main actor in a struggle for liberation) rather than oppressed or underprivileged groups in any given society, no matter that state’s tyranny. Blind to the social war occurring within Syria itself, the Syrian people (where they exist) are viewed as mere pawns in a geo-political chess game. They repeat the mantra ‘Assad is the legitimate ruler of a sovereign country’. Assad – who inherited a dictatorship from his father and has never held, let alone won, a free and fair election. Assad – whose ‘Syrian Arab Army’ can only regain the territory it lost with the backing of a hotchpotch of foreign mercenaries and

against the Prussians, turned their weapons on the Communards, so the Syrian regime directed all of its might against the people of Zabadani. The town was subjected to a siege, enforced by the regime and its ally the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, and daily bombing led to a dramatic worsening of humanitarian conditions. Inside the town, revolutionaries also faced challenges from extremist Islamist battalions which gained in prominence over time and finally wrested control from the local council in 2014. After a number of failed cease-fire agreements the regime regained control of Zabadani in April 2017, after which many of its residents were forcibly evacuated.

The experience of Zabadani was remarkable, but not unique. Over the course of the Syrian revolution, land was liberated to such an extent that, by 2013, the regime had lost control of around four-fifths of the national territory. In the absence of the state, it was people’s self organisation which kept communities functioning and allowed them to resist the regime, in some cases for years. Hundreds of local councils were established in the newly created autonomous zones providing essential public services such as water and electricity supplies, rubbish collection, and supporting schools and hospitals to keep operating. In some areas they grew and distributed food. People also worked together to set up humanitarian organisations, human rights monitoring centres, and independent media associations. Women’s centres were founded to encourage women to be politically and economically active and to challenge patriarchal mores. One example is the Mazaya centre in Kafranbel, Idlib, which taught vocational skills to women, held discussions on women’s rights issues, and challenged the threats posed by extremist Islamist groups. Unions were established for students, journalists and health workers. In the northern city of Manbij, revolutionaries established Syria’s first free trade union, which campaigned for better wages. Cultural activities flourished, including independent film collectives, art galleries and theatre groups. In the liberated town of Daraya, close to Damascus, revolutionaries built an underground library from books they salvaged from people’s destroyed homes.

After 2011, before the counter-revolution ground them down, communities across Syria lived in freedom from the tyranny of the regime. Power was brought down to the local level and people worked together for their mutual benefit, often in extremely challenging circumstances, to build a pluralistic, diverse, inclusive and democratic society that was the very antithesis of the state’s totalitarianism. They were not motivated by any grand ideologies, nor led by any one faction or party. They were driven by necessity. Their very existence challenged the myth propagated by the state that its survival was necessary to ensure the fulfillment of basic needs and stability. Syrians showed that they were more than capable of organising their communities in the absence of centralised, coercive authority by building egalitarian social structures and recreating social bonds of solidarity, cooperation and mutual respect. There was no one model or blueprint. Each community organised in accordance with its own needs, unique local circumstances and values – the very essence of self-determination – essential in a country which is as socially and culturally diverse as Syria. What they shared was a desire for autonomy from the regime and a commitment to decentralized, self-managed forms of organisation.

Whilst the experience of the Paris commune is well known and celebrated in the West, we must ask why similar experiments happening in our own time in Syria are not – why they have usually failed to attract even the most basic forms of solidarity. Whilst much radical theory holds pretensions to universalism, it often pays little attention to other, non-Western contexts or cultures. When leftists in the West think of Syria they often think of foreign state intervention, extremist Islamist groups, and numerous armed brigades jostling and competing for power and territory. Little attention is given to ordinary men and women and their courageous acts of defiance against a tyrannical, genocidal regime. These people formed the backbone of Syria’s civil resistance. They not only resisted the regime but built a viable, beautiful alternative to it. Their struggle became multi-faceted. They defended their hard-won autonomy from the regime and later numerous foreign forces and extremist groups that saw their existence as the greatest threat. They were shunned and often slandered by the international community, including by people who consider themselves part of the anti-imperialist left. Their existence became an inconvenience to the grand narratives people wanted to indulge in regarding Syria’s revolution and counter-revolutionary war. Epistemological imperialism left little room for Syrian’s lived realities.

As with the Paris Commune, there is much to be learnt from Syria’s revolutionary experience. In times of insurrection or at times of crisis, new ways of organising often emerge which provide alternatives to the hierarchical, coercive and exploitative systems practiced by both capitalism and the state. Through decentralised self-organisation, without the need for leaders or bosses, but through voluntary association, cooperation and the sharing of resources, people can transform social relations and effect radical social change. They show us that emancipatory futures can be built in the here and now, even in the shadow of the state.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2021/03/18/building-alternative-futures-in-the-present-the-case-of-syrias-communes/>

The US protests: Lessons from Syria

Leila Al Shami (6.6.20)

Over the past few days, an uprising has raged in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States in response to the murder of George Floyd by police. In the spirit of solidarity with those on the streets, I was prompted to think about the lessons from the Syrian revolution that might be applicable to the US context.

People rise up when they can no longer breathe

In Syria, the first protest to take place was a direct response to police brutality. On 17 February, 2011, some 1,500 people gathered in the Damascene neighborhood of Hareeqa following an incident in which traffic police beat up the son of a local trader. Yet the wider context for the uprising was four decades of political repression and socioeconomic injustice under the Assad dictatorship, and the impetus given by the transnational revolutionary wave that was emerging across the region. Protests grew exponentially in response to further acts of violence by the state against protesters. The brutal killing of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb, who died in police custody after being detained at a protest in Daraa, caused thousands to take to the streets. The more vicious the state’s response to the protests, the more it galvanized the Syrian people. Soon demands for “reform” became cries for “revolution.”

The brutal killing of George Floyd also acted as a catalyst for protests in the US. It comes, however, on the back of long-term, systemic societal and institutional racism; the social, political, and economic marginalization of black communities; and a long history of police brutality which disproportionately targets black men. The response of the state to the current protests will be one factor determining the future direction the movement takes.

Social movements are diverse and contain many different currents

The Syrian revolution was characterized by its diversity. It contained men and women from all of Syria’s different localities and ethnic and religious groups united around the aims of freedom, democracy, and social justice. Undoubtedly it also contained diverse political currents, as beyond these immediate aims no political program for the future of Syria was articulated; it was assumed that would be worked out through an electoral process. Whilst the movement certainly contained many contradictory elements, extremist Islamists did not have a visible presence initially, despite propaganda to that effect by the state and its supporters. Extremist Islamism grew over the years in response to the violent chaos wrought by the state, following the trajectory of the peaceful protest movement towards armed struggle. Free Syrians then had to battle on two fronts; against both the Assad regime and extremist Islamist elements which tried to hijack the movement.

By contrast, in the US, far-right elements are visible on the streets from the outset, trying to capitalize on and hijack the protests for their own ends. Their presence is not a reason to reject the whole movement. Progressives should stand in solidarity with progressive elements and communities most impacted by state violence. Through solidarity, we give strength to those who reflect the values and ideals we hold, and support them to grow and effectively challenge their opponents.

The state will slander a movement as extremist, while targeting progressives and letting extremism flourish

In Syria, peaceful protesters were smeared as “Islamist extremists.” This tarring of the movement was used as justification for the state’s escalation of violence and acts of repression, and aimed to justify its crackdown on the opposition to both internal and external audiences. At the same time as the state began rounding up thousands of peaceful pro-democracy protestors for probable death-by-torture, it released Islamist extremists from prison. Some of those released from state custody in 2011 and 2012 went on to form the most hard-line Islamist brigades, such as Zahran Alloush, the former head of Jaysh al-Islam; Hassan Abboud, the former head of Ahrar al-Sham; and numerous figures who became part of the leadership of the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as ISIS. Assad also encouraged acts of violence by *shabbiha* (sectarian regime-aligned militias) in order to galvanize a violent response from the opposition and encourage a spiral of violence, in which the state—being better-armed—would always have the upper hand.

In the US context, numerous videos have emerged of police targeting peaceful demonstrators with tear gas and arrest, as armed fascists roam the streets unmolested and appear to provoke acts of violence. Donald Trump has already declared the anti-fascist movement (ANTIFA) as the main threat, accusing it of responsibility for all acts of violence and looting, and announcing his intent to designate it a terrorist organization. Trump supporters and far-right groups are using tactics designed to instigate a violent response.

Democrats will always be the main threat to authoritarian regimes, as they embody the alternative. Framing the opposition as “terrorists” enables the state to justify an extreme crackdown on the opposition, portraying its actions as a security response (a “War on Terror”) designed to re-establish stability. It further allows the state to dehumanize its opponents, to encourage support for their liquidation. Assad labeled Syrian protesters “germs;” Trump sees protesting Americans as “thugs.” The threat of violence will be used to try to deter people from protesting. Both Assad and Trump threatened to use the military to crush the movement (Assad followed through on his threat).

Opponents of the movement will accuse protesters of being outside-agitators or hirelings of foreign powers

Syrian revolutionaries have been denied all agency for instigating an uprising against a repressive regime. From the outset, the regime’s public response to the protests was framed by conspiracy theories. State media spoke of “infiltrators” and “armed gangs” causing chaos, and of “foreign powers” and “Salafist terrorists” inciting violence. In Assad’s first televised address to the People’s Assembly in response to the protests in March 2011, he warned that Syria’s “enemies work every day in an organized, systematic, and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria’s stability.” The Syrian state was cast as a victim, despite holding an absolute monopoly on violence. Over the years, both the regime and its supporters have stuck to this narrative. Syrian revolutionaries have been slandered as agents of the US, Israel, and the Gulf states, notwithstanding the absolute idiocy of the claim that the CIA could somehow mobilize hundreds of thousands of people from Qamishli to Daraa, or that Syrians would be content to have their children tortured to death until some clever white man told them to do something about it.

In the US, Minnesota’s governor Tim Walz has claimed that the majority of those looting and destroying property are from outside the cities, bent on “attacking civil society” and “instilling fear.” Insinuations have also been made that the protest movement is supported or indeed instigated by Russia. On CNN, former National Security Advisor Susan Rice said, “I would not be surprised to learn that they have fomented some of these extremists on both sides using social media ... I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they are funding it in some way, shape, or form.”

In times of uprising conspiracy theories will flourish. They are meant to distract from the fact that there are real people involved with real grievances, and their aim is to support the state by discrediting the opposition. At some point the conspiracies will inevitably take on an anti-Semitic turn and lead back to George Soros and “the Jews.” Conspiracy theories may be spread by people formally seen as allies. The best way to guard against this is to listen to the voices of those directly involved in the movement on the ground and constantly check the accuracy of sources.

The legitimacy of government resides in the people

Syrians have been repeatedly told by outsiders that they should abandon their struggle, and accept being tortured, raped, gassed, bombed, and starved because Assad is the “legitimate” ruler of Syria. This is said despite the fact Assad has never once won a free and fair election, but rather inherited the dictatorship from his father. Indeed, holding elections was and remains the key demand of the opposition to the regime. Apparently, Syrians are not ready for democracy, and, should Assad fall, what would take his place would be worse than the current genocidal regime. Yet in areas liberated from the regime, Free Syrians held the first democratic elections in four decades; set up local councils to self-govern their communities; and fought hard to defend their autonomy despite repeated attacks on these civil structures by both the regime and authoritarian Islamists.

The US, by contrast, is a democracy, and Trump was elected president. Given the grievances of a large section of the population, however, this is not a reason to oppose the current protests. People always have the right to challenge and change their leaders, elected or not.

Whether foreign states support or condemn a movement (or the state) will solely be based on their own interests

Many states rhetorically supported Syria’s protest movement, but few gave practical support. The US itself, for example, issued many statements calling for Assad to go, but prevented the armed opposition from receiving the heavy weaponry it needed to defend communities from the aerial assault which was the main cause of Syria’s destruction, massive death toll, and waves of displacement, and which could have changed the balance of power on the ground. The US’s support was driven by a desire to force Assad to the negotiating table, rather than overthrow the regime. When Washington did eventually intervene militarily in Syria, it was only in the context of the “War on Terror” against ISIS. By contrast, foreign powers such as Russia and Iran gave significant military and diplomatic support to the regime. Russia’s interest was likely determined primarily by a wish to provide a counter-balance to US interests in the region (rather than by any love for the Syrian regime), as well as to test out new weaponry on the Syrian people. Iran has always seen the Syrian regime as an ally providing a link between Tehran and Iran’s client Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As for the US, figures from the European Union have stated they are “shocked and appalled” by the killing of George Floyd, and have reiterated their support for peaceful protest, in language very similar to that used in response to Syria’s protests over eight years ago. China, furious at Washington’s support for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, and criticism over its handling of the Coronavirus, has been more outspoken. It has rhetorically backed the protest movement, saying it highlights the country’s “chronic disease” of racism, never mind that the Chinese state is currently holding more than a million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps.

Of course, states are not our allies. Thankfully, Americans are not in a situation where their state is using weaponry designed for inter-state conflict against protesting communities, rendering them more dependent on outside assistance to protect themselves from annihilation. Despite their declarations, at the end of the day states will work together to support state stability and crush any popular demands seen as too radical or threatening the existing order in a way they cannot themselves control. What is important is that people stand together, shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity against authoritarian regimes, police brutality, racism, patriarchy, and socioeconomic injustice. In this regard, the US protest movement has so far attracted the solidarity of people and communities across the globe. Free Syrians were not so fortunate. Through people-to-people solidarity we can exchange views, tactics, and experience of struggle. Having lived nine years and counting of revolutionary struggle, Syrians have a lot to offer to Americans in this regard. Together we are strong.

An authoritarian state will target the media

Under the Assad dictatorship, Syria has never had a free media. During the revolution, journalists became key targets for arrest and assassination due to their witnessing and reporting on state brutality. Countless Syrian citizen journalists have lost their lives trying to report the regime’s crimes to the world. They have been targeted not only by the state but also by other authoritarian groups that have clamped down on independent voices and civil society.

Foreign war correspondents, too, have been deliberately assassinated by the regime, such as the American journalist Marie Colvin, killed while covering the 2012 siege of Homs. Meanwhile, the regime and its supporters attempt to control the narrative through state and sympathetic media.

In the US, there have been multiple examples of police deliberately targeting journalists during the protests for George Floyd. Sometimes these have included a clear racial element, such as the arrest of a black CNN reporter while his white colleagues were left alone. According to a report by independent open-source investigators at Bellingcat, “journalists have been shot with rubber bullets, targeted with stun grenades, tear gassed, physically attacked, pepper sprayed, and arrested.”

It’s important to give as much support as possible to independent media, and especially citizen journalists, who are on the ground and can give better-informed analysis of the situation as it unfolds, providing vital context and links to those most immediately affected by events.

Everyone will have an opinion, including people who know absolutely nothing

When an uprising breaks out everyone will become an “expert” on the country overnight. And, with that, I’ll finish this piece. Because whilst I’m fortunate enough to speak English and have some contact with people on the ground participating in the current protests, allowing me limited access to information regarding what is happening, I’m no expert. I’ve spent a total of only six weeks in the US, and have never been involved in political organizing there, nor have I spent years researching and studying the country, its politics, economy, and culture, which might enable me to give an informed opinion. Now really is the one time we should be centering American voices and listening to, and learning from, the people directly affected.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2020/06/06/the-us-protests-lessons-from-syria/>

Idlib resists

by Leila Al Shami (9.11.19)

Over the past few days a popular uprising has broken out across Idlib against the hardline Islamist group HTS (formerly Al-Qaeda linked Nusra) which is militarily dominant in much of the province.

The recent uprising began when HTS increased *Zakaat* (taxes) on a number of goods and services including bread, electricity and olive oil .

In Kafar Takharim, a town in north-western Idlib, which is dependent on olive oil production for income, locals refused to pay increased taxes and attempts by HTS to control the olive oil presses .

The local council in Kafar Takharim has long resisted attempts at take over by the HTS linked Salvation Government. Locals staged protests and stormed HTS controlled olive presses and police stations, successfully evicting HTS from their community.

HTS surrounded the town and demanded that locals hand over a number of individuals who participated in the protests under threat of retaliation. The locals refused and determined to continue their resistance against the militants.

On 6 November HTS forces besieged the town and began attacking it with mortar and machine gun fire killing at least 3 people and injuring others. But the locals continued resisting and all around Idlib towns and villages rose up in solidarity with Kafar Takharim, demanding that HTS and it’s leader Jolani leave the province. People took to the streets in Idlib city , Salqin, Maarat Al Nu’man, Darkush, Samarda, Ariha, Kurin, Armanaz and elsewhere. People from Armanaz and Idlib city began marching towards Kafar Takharim to try and break the siege but were blocked by HTS militants. On 7 November protesters from Salqin managed to break into the town from the north.

Popular resistance to HTS has been a regular occurrence in Idlib province and chants against Jolani are regularly heard at the anti-regime

protests which are held almost every Friday. Many see the group’s authoritarianism as no different from that of the regime.

HTS militants increased their control over the province in January following intense fighting with rebel groups. Since then it has attempted to impose control over civilian governance through the creation of the Salvation Government which has taken over service provision, local councils and education despite the wide-spread resistance of locals who have courageously attempted to defend their autonomy and the democratic institutions they established following liberation from the regime.

People were further outraged by wide-spread arrests which have targeted civil society activists and media workers some of whom are reported to have died under torture in HTS-run prisons. HTS is widely believed to have been behind the assassinations of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in November 2018 who were key figures in revolutionary organizing in Idlib and involved in the popular independent radio station Radio Fresh.

In September large scale protests erupted against HTS and the continuing aerial bombardment of the province by the regime and Russia. The regime intensified its assault on the province in April conducting a scorched-earth campaign against residential areas which has caused around half a million to flee, has killed over 1,000 and has directly targeted civilian infrastructure including over 50 hospitals and medical centres.

The dominant narrative promoted by the regime and supporters of Syrian fascism is that Idlib is a ‘terrorist enclave’. The presence of a few thousand extremist militants is presented as justification for the campaign of extermination waged against Idlib’s civilian population of some 3 million people, which includes 1 million children.

Today’s uprising should challenge this narrative. Syrians have continually resisted all forms of authoritarianism and sought to defend their autonomy and desire for freedom and democracy since 2011.

Despite being trapped between the regime and extremists, Idlib remains home to many inspiring civil initiatives and outpourings of creative resistance. Just a few weeks ago, 20 year old rapper Amir Al Muarri released the fierce track ‘On All Fronts’ produced in Idlib. The video (which has subtitles in English, Spanish and Russian) provides a portrait of the province and the diversity of its residents who continue to survive and resist despite living apocalyptic conditions. He spares no criticism for the brutality of the regime, the armed factions which have hijacked the revolution and the foreign interventions of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

It’s people like Amir and the civilians risking their lives to protest today who are Syria’s future and who defy lazy assumptions that the choice Syrians face is between a fascist regime and Al Qaeda. There’s always been a third option.

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2019/11/09/idlib-resists/>

The Syrian Quagmire

Leila Al Shami (11.3.19)

If 2011 looked like the moment when people could unite, both within and across countries, to topple decades-old dictatorships with the demand for freedom and social justice; today looks like the moment of counter-revolutionary success. After eight years of increasingly brutal conflict in Syria, Assad still presides over a now destroyed, fragmented and traumatized country. The narrative is that the war is nearing its end. States once vocally opposed to Assad now have other strategic concerns which take precedence over the victims of his savage efforts to hold onto power. Yet on the ground conditions are far from stable and civilians remain trapped and are paying the price for ongoing struggles for power and territory between the regime, foreign states and ideological war lords.

Trump’s announcement (by tweet) in December, that he planned to withdraw US troops from Syria, led to panic amongst many Syrians, and precipitated a new wave of jostling between international and regional powers. The Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which have been working