

Self-organization of the popular struggles in Syria against the regime and Islamist groups? Yes, it exists!

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Presentation

For more than two years, most observers have analysed the Syrian revolutionary process in geopolitical terms, from above, and ignored the popular political and socio-economic dynamics at the bottom. The threats of a Western intervention have only reinforced this idea of an opposition between two camps: The Western states and the Gulf monarchies on one side, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other. We refuse to choose between these two camps, we refuse this logic of the "least harmful [evil]" which will only lead to the loss of the Syrian revolution and its objective: democracy, social justice and the rejection of sectarianism. Our support goes to the revolutionary people fighting for its freedom and emancipation. Indeed, only a people fighting will allow not only the fall of the regime, but also the creation of a secular democratic state and the emergence of social justice. A society respecting and guaranteeing each and everyone's right to practice their religion and respecting their equality without discriminating against them on the basis of religion, ethnic background, gender, etc.

Only masses developing their own mobilization potential can realize change through their collective action. This is the abc of revolutionary politics. But this abc, today, faces a profound skepticism from numerous leftist milieus in the West. We are told that we are taking our desires for realities, that there may have been an early revolution in Syria two years and a half ago, but that things changed since then. We are told that jihadism has taken over the fight against the regime, that it is no longer a revolution but a war and that there is a need to choose a camp to find a concrete solution.

All the "debate" on the left is polluted by this "campist" logic, often accompanied by conspiracy theories that blur the fundamental differences between the left and the right - and especially the far-right. When a journalist testifies what he or she saw on the ground, in this or that region under rebel control, and this testimony dismisses the dominant explanations on the jihadist hegemony, he or she is ignored. Some even imply that those tales are part of the media lies, that aim to make the opposition look presentable to justify an imperialist intervention and thus that we cannot credit it [their depiction].

We asked Joseph Daher, Syrian revolutionary activist, member of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria, currently living in Switzerland, to explain the state of the popular movements in his country, specifically the self-organization of the masses in the liberated regions, the struggle against sectarianism and against islamists. The conclusion that comes out of this is clear: yes, the revolution is still alive in Syria, and it needs our solidarity.

LCR Web

Self-organization of the popular struggles in Syria against the regime and Islamist groups? Yes, it exists!

From the outset of the revolution, the main forms of organization have been the popular committees at the village, city and regional levels. The popular committees were the true spearheads of the movement that mobilized the people for the protests. Then, the regions liberated from the regime developed forms of self-gestion based on the organization of the masses. Elected popular councils emerged to manage those liberated regions, proving that it was the regime that provoked anarchy, not the people.

Popular committees, elections, and civil administrations

In some regions liberated from the regime armed forces, civil administrations were also set up to make up for the absence of the state and take charge of its duties in various fields, like schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, electricity, communications. Those civil administrations were implemented through elections and (or by) popular consensus and have for main tasks to provide civil services, security and civil peace.

Free local elections in the “liberated” zones have occurred for the first time since 40 years in certain regions, neighborhoods and villages. This is the case for instance in the city of Deir Ezzor, late February 2013, where a voter Ahmad Mohammad declared that “we want a democratic state, not an islamic state, we want a secular state managed by civilians and not mollahs.”

Those local councils reflect the sense of responsibility and the capacity of citizens to take on initiatives to manage their affairs relying on their managerial staff, experiences and clean energy. There are various forms, both in regions still under regime control and those that have freed themselves from it.

Another concrete example of this dynamic of self-management was seen at the meeting of the foundation of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition in Syria, that occurred early June in Aleppo. The reunion gathered a broad range of committee activists and coordinating committees that have played an important role on the ground since the start of the revolution in Syria. They came from various regions of the country and represented larges segments of Syrian society. The conference was introduced as a key step to represent the revolutionary youth of all the communities.

This does not mean that there are no limits sometimes to those popular councils, such as the lack of representation of women, or of certain minorities. It is not about embellishing the reality, but to re-

establish the truth.

The example of Raqqa

A prominent example of self-management of the masses is the city of Raqqa, the only provincial capital that has been liberated from the regime (since March 2013). Still under regime shelling, Raqqa is completely autonomous and it is the local population that manages all the civil services for the collectivity. Another equally important element in the popular dynamic of the revolution is the proliferation of independent newspapers produced by popular organizations. The number of newspapers went from three before the revolution – that were in the hands of the regime – to more than sixty written by popular groups.

In Raqqa, the popular organizations are most often led by the youth. They have multiplied, to the extent that more than 42 social movements were officially registered at the end of May. The popular committees have organized various campaigns. One example is the “revolutionary flag represents me” campaign, which consists in painting the revolutionary flag in the neighborhoods and the streets of the city, to oppose the islamists’ campaign to impose the black Islamist flag. On the cultural front, a play mocking the Assad regime was played at the center of the city and, in the beginning of June, the popular organizations have organized an exhibit of art and local crafts. Centers were established to take care of the youth and treat psychological disorders as a result of the war. The end of the year Syrian baccalaureate exams, in June and July, were entirely organized by volunteers.

These types of experiences of self-management are found in many liberated regions. It is worth noting that women play a great role in these movements and in the protests in general.

For instance on 18 June 2013, in the city of Raqqa, a mass protest led by women was held in front of the Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra’s headquarters, where the protesters called for the liberation of the incarcerated prisoners. The protesters hailed slogans against Jabhat al-Nusra, and denounced their actions. The protesters did not hesitate to hail the first slogan used in Damascus in February 2011: “the Syrian people refuses to be humiliated.” The group “Haquna” (meaning our right), of which many women are part of, have also organized many gatherings against the Islamist groups in Raqqa, hailing among other things “Raqqa is free, down with Jabhat al-Nusra.”

In the city of Deir Ezzor, in June, a campaign was launched by local activists that sought to encourage citizens to take part to the process of surveillance and the documentation of the practices of the popular local councils. Among other things, it encouraged them to promote their rights and the culture of human rights in society. There was a particular emphasis on the idea of rights and justice for all.

A clear manifestation of the dynamic of the popular revolution is the emergence of newspapers produced by popular organizations. The number of newspapers has indeed increased from three before the revolution – all belonging to the regime – to more than sixty written by popular groups.

Against the Islamists

Those are the same popular organizations that have most often opposed armed Islamist groups. The latter want to use force to take control of the liberated zones while they have no roots in the popular movement, and they are not from the revolution.

The city of Raqqa has for instance seen a continuous and unshaken resistance against the islamist groups. Since the city was liberated from regime troops, in March 2013, many protests were organized rejecting the ideology and authoritarian practices of the islamist groups.

There were solidarity gatherings require the liberation kidnapped activists held in islamist-held prisons. The protests enabled the liberation of some activists, but numerous others remain in jail to this day, like the famous Father Paolo, and others including the son of the intellectual Yassin Hajj Saleh, Firas.

Similar protests contesting the authoritarian and reactionary practices of the islamists took place in Aleppo, in Mayadin, al-Qusayr and other cities like Kafranbel. Those fights are ongoing today.

In the neighborhood of Bustan Qasr, in Aleppo, the local population has protested numerous times to denounce the actions of the Sharia Council of Aleppo, which gathers many islamist groups. On 23 August for instance, the protesters of Bustan Qasr, while condemning the massacre through chemical weapons committed by the regime against people in Eastern Ghouta, were also calling for the liberation of the famous activist Abu Maryam, once more jailed by the Sharia Council of Aleppo. They continue until today to demand his release. At the end of June 2013, in the same neighborhood, the activists hailed "go f*c* yourself Islamic council," protesting the repressive and authoritarian politics of the latter. Popular outrage was also expressed following the assassination by foreign jihadists belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group (ISIS) of a 14-year old boy, who allegedly made a blasphemous comment in a joke referring to Prophet Mohammad. A protest was organized by the popular committee of Bustan Qasr against the Islamic council and the islamist groups. Activists hailed "what a shame, what a shame, the revolutionaries became shabiha," and compared the Islamic council to the Syrian regime's secret police, a clear allusion to their authoritarian practices.

There are weekly protests on Fridays. During the one on Friday 2 August 2013, the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), who play an important informative role for the revolution, but also a role of support by supplying foods, good and services to the populations and the refugees, declared this in a release: "in a unified message from the revolution to the entire world, we are confirming that the kidnapping of activists and essential actors of the revolution, unless they serve tyranny, hinder the freedom and the dignity of the revolution." This message was addressed directly to those reactionary islamist groups. In the same vein, on 28 July 2013, the LCCs wrote a release with the title "the tyranny is one, whether in the name of religion or of secularism," rejecting both the islamists and the regime.

We should also note that some jihadist forces, such as Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS, have concentrated on trying to reach hegemony in some liberated areas attacking activists and FSA battailons, rather to fight against the regime, while many jihadists pouring into Syria from countries like Iraq and Lebanon are not flocking to the front lines. Instead they are concentrating their efforts on consolidating control in the northern, rebel-held areas of the country. Many Jabhat al Nusra fighters left in the middle of ongoing rebel operations in Homs, Hama and Idlib to head for Raqqa province once the provincial capital fell in March 2013. During the battle for Qusayr in late May, Jabhat al Nusra units were noticeably absent. In early June, rebel reinforcements rallied to take the town of Talbiseh, north of Homs city, while Jabhat al Nusra fighters preferred to stay in the liberated areas to fill the vacuum that the Free Syrian Army affiliates had left behind.

We repeat once more that these jihadists and islamists reactionary groups are an enemy of the revolution, alongside all groups that encourage sectarianism, kidnapping, torture and murder, as a practice of power must be considered enemies of the revolution to fight.

Some last events confirm us their reactionary behavior.

The seizure of the city of Maaloula was for example presented by Jabhat al-Nusra's official account, as part of the "Eye-for-an-Eye" revenge campaign, initially declared after the chemical weapons attacks in the Ghouta. One of Nusra's photos for the attack on Ma'loula was published on Facebook with a verse from the Qur'an stating: "Allah give us patience and victory over the infidels" — perhaps not the best slogan to use when launching an al-Qaida-led attack in which a Jordanian Islamist blows himself up at the gate of the oldest Christian village in the country.

The ISIS was also accused of forcibly collecting taxes to owners of shops in different areas under their control, such as in Raqqa (taxes as up to 15 000 Syrian liras) Tell Abiyad, and other cities.

A couple of weeks ago, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights received a footage of fighters from the ISIS cutting off the heads of 2 men, the man in the footage states that the men were cooperating with the regime. Activists from Aleppo city reported that the execution took place at the end of August near the al-Dweiraniya village of eastern Reef Aleppo. [1] This kind of behavior must be condemned strongly, just as their attacks on activists pro revolution and FSA bataillons.

Arabs and Kurds United

In the Northeastern part of Syria, populated by a majority of Kurds, recent battles between islamists and Kurdish militias from the PYD (linked to the PKK) has led to the emergence of many popular initiatives from the activists and the local population. Those popular initiatives aimed to show the brotherhood of Kurds and Arabs in this region, and to reaffirm that the popular Syrian revolution is for all, and that it condemns racism and sectarianism. During those battles, in the Raqqa province, the city of Tall Abyad has seen the creation of the "Chirko Ayoubi" brigade, which joined the Kurdish Front brigade on 22 July 2013. This brigade now gathers Arabs and Kurds together. They have published a common declaration denouncing the violations committed by islamist groups and the attempts at dividing the Syrian people and ethnic and sectarian bases. Unfortunately some other FSA forces have fought on the side of the islamists.

In the city of Aleppo, in the Achrafieh neighborhood – mostly populated by Kurds – a protest was organized on 1 August 2013, gathering many hundreds of people supporting the brotherhood between Arab and Kurds, and condemning the acts committed by islamist extremist groups against the Kurdish population and chanting the unity of the Syrian people.

In the city of Tell Abyad, which has suffered from heavy fighting, the activists have tried to organize many initiatives aiming to end the military fighting between the two groups, and to stop the forced (expulsion?) departures of civilians, to put in place a popular committee to govern and manage the city and to promote collaborative initiatives and actions between the Arab and Kurdish populations, to reach a consensus through pacific means. The efforts are ongoing despite the continuous battle between islamists and Kurdish militias.

In the city of Amouda, around thirty activists met up on 5 August 2013 with Kurdish and Syrian revolutionary flags behind a poster saying "I love you Homs," to show their solidarity with this city besieged by the Syrian regime's army.

Recently again, in the city of Quamishli – where Arab populations (Muslim and Christian), Kurds and Assyrians live – local activists have organized numerous projects to ensure coexistence and the administration of certain neighborhoods by joint committees. In the same city, the branch of the

Free Kurdish student Union has started a small internet campaign calling for freedom, peace and brotherhood, tolerance and equality for the future of Syria.

In a great majority of cases, the Syrian popular movement has not stopped to repeat its rejection of sectarianism, despite attempts by the regime and islamist groups to lighten this dangerous fire. The slogans of the protesters, such as “we are all Syrians, we are all united” and “No to sectarianism” are repeated constantly to this day.

Thus, the popular committees and the organizations play a crucial role in the pursuit of the revolutionary process, because those are essential actors who enable the popular movement to resist. It is not about diminishing the role played by the armed resistance, but the latter depend on the popular movements to continue its fight. Without it, we would not stand a chance.

“Death rather than humiliation”

In conclusion, the Syrian revolution is still there, continues, and will not stop. It will continue despite this war without mercy led by the regime against the popular movement, as well as its repeated massacres against the civilian population; and despite the internal threats from the islamist and reactionary groups. Though they represent a minority, those groups are dangerous and they are also enemies of the revolution, through their opposition to the objectives of the uprising for the democracy and social justice, their sectarian ideology and their authoritarian practices.

Like the protesters continue to sing in the many protests “The Syrian people won’t be humiliated” and “death rather than humiliation”. The popular movement will continue its fight until the victory of the objectives of the revolution.

Viva people’s revolutions!

Power and Wealth to the people!

Joseph Daher

Post Scriptum regarding foreign interventions and anti war mobilisations

The Revolutionary Left Current in Syria, alongside 5 other socialists revolutionary organisations in the region [2], have declared their opposition to any possible future Western intervention, while also condemning the massive, murderous and destructive interventions of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the side of the Assad regime in its war against the revolutionaries. This declaration also opposed the interventions of jihadists reactionary and terrorist groups supported by gulf monarchies that want to transform this popular revolution into a sectarian war because they fear the victory and the spread of the revolution to the region and their borders. We know that the US intervention has no intention to overthrow the regime, but merely to punish it, in Obama’s words, the current Syrian leadership and save face for the US administration, after all the threats concerning the use of chemical weapons. and to push the regime towards negotiations. A US strike has to be understood in the framework of defending its vital interests, in addition to Israel’s interests and security. We, the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria, demand instead the provision of arms without political

conditions to the democratic components of the Free Syrian army and also the provision of humanitarian aids to the population in needs inside and outside of Syria.

The FSA is not a an islamist force as portrayed in many medias, they are many battalions representative of the richness of Syrian society composed of Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Druzes, Kurds, Assyrians etc.. In many regions, they submitted to and collaborated with civilian authority, working closely with local administrative councils. And they have struggled to ensure that their fight against Assad will pave the way for a new democratic society. In some regions controlled by the FSA weekly forums and gatherings are held in which citizens were able to speak freely, and have their concerns addressed directly by local authorities as we explained above. In the same time the Assad regime, so-called protector of the minorities as presented by some, has destroyed more than 30 churches since the beginning of the revolution.

We claim once again our support for the Syrian revolution and its objectives: democracy, social justice and no to sectarianism.

This said, the so-called solidarity with the Syrian people is a joke and moreover an insult from organizations and people that are saying no to Western foreign interventions in Syria, while they have said and say nothing on massive foreign interventions of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, and above all not give a shit or said a single word to condemn the more than 100 000 martyred, multiple massacres, millions of refugees and destructions since the beginning of the revolution in Syria and committed by the Assad regime, in addition to nothaving supported the popular movement for democracy and social justice against the Assad regime, on the opposite they have undermined it and / or tried to portray the movement as a conspiracy following the Assad regime propaganda lines most of the time. Solidarity has to be based first of all on the the support of the popular movement in its revolution for democracy and social justice in the case of Syria and elsewhere and on internationalism, in other words support the people in their struggle for emancipation and liberation. Only when this point is clear can you raise such slogans.

Whatever happens, we believe as a Syrian Revolutionary Youth in Homs wrote on his placard:

"Obama's and others' statements do not matter to us. We started our revolution, and we will be the ones to finish it. Our unity is stronger than any foreign strike."

The revolution continues and still lives... and it needs our solidarity!

P.S.

* This article was published on the blog Syria Freedom Forever on 8 September 2013 with the following note:

This post is a translation of a French piece written on the [Belgian] Communist Revolutionary League's website, on Wednesday 4 September 2013. The piece was translated by Audrey Ann Lavallee. I thank her a lot for her work and her support.

Additional information and text was added to the original version in French [version available on ESSF too].

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvXIYzU3ou8&feature=youtu.be>

[2] See on ESSF (article 29623), "[We Stand Behind the Syrian People's Revolution - No to Foreign Intervention Sunday 1 September 2013](#)"