

SYRIA

The complexity of the syrian revolutionary process that is underway

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This interview with left activist Munif Mulhem [1] was conducted by the editor of the Arab revolutionary Marxist journal *Permanent Revolution*, published jointly by the Socialist Forum (Lebanon), the Organization of Revolutionary Socialists (Egypt) the Al-Mounadil-a current (Morocco) the League for a Workers' Left (Tunisia), the Current of the Revolutionary Left (Syria) and the Union of Iraqi Communists (Iraq).

Permanent Revolution: The first phase of the revolt against the Syrian regime, which had a peaceful character, gives the impression of having been a global popular movement, which was joined by people of all religions and faiths, all walks of life, all ages, of both sexes, etc., But when it began to become militarized the religious and denominational character took over, especially in its military component. What do you think of this phenomenon and what are the causes?

Munif Mulhem: The militarization was not a choice of peaceful protesters for freedom and dignity. It was the violence by the regime against the peaceful movement, whether by firing on protesters in the streets and squares, or arresting them and torturing them to death, which prompted the revolution to take up arms. And during the first months, the bearing of arms was exterior to the revolutionary field. It was due to the desertion of soldiers who refused to kill their own people, or who assumed their responsibility towards their people, who were facing violence that was unprecedented in the world. The military formations that were set up at that time then took on religious names - such as the Farouk brigade [2] - but they were not, however, religious formations.

The change that took place within these formations is the result of the course followed by religious currents present on the Syrian scene before the revolution, or which formed themselves after the beginning of the revolution, who created their own structures, acting for their own account and for their political orientations, after having been unable to contain the military formations led by the officers and the soldiers who had deserted the regime and because they believed that the regime was on the point of falling, as it seemed to be at the end of 2011. Also, they created their own militias as a means of pressure, for the future, on the components of the revolution, in order to gain hegemony over them, through these militias, inspired by the Libyan experience in every sense, and taking advantage of the flow of funds and weapons from states, individuals and organizations in the Gulf.

That is how the dissident officers were marginalized and how there emerged brigades making no

secret of their religious ideology and their objectives, which differed from those that the revolution had adopted. The uncontrolled inflow of funds from abroad excited the envy of every kind of adventurer or anyone who aspired to create his brigade or raise his standard in the name of Islam, or under a banner that would make it possible to obtain material gains, in money or weapon, because he claimed to represent Islam. The course followed by the regime for 40 years, aiming to destroy the social fabric of Syria and to give the popular movement a religious sectarian character after the beginning of the revolution, and with that aim indulging in every kind of sectarian killings and arbitrary actions; all of this opened the road to these forces, and they emerged with the orientation they have.

Permanent Revolution: In a previous interview of last January, which you gave to the publication *Murassiloun*, you said we could not avoid the use of military force to overthrow the regime, whereas many people in Syria, with at their head the Coordinating Committee, called for the rejection of a military solution, and for reliance only on peaceful struggle to get rid of the regime. How do you explain your point of view?

Munif Mulhem: From the late 1970s and early 1980s, the battle between the regime and religious forces was transformed into an armed struggle. These forces, which were then called the Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood, represented the spearhead of the struggle against the regime. The transformations in the structure of the regime in the late 1970s took on qualitative dimensions, particularly with the establishment of security apparatuses within the structures of the army and the creation of the State Security, which had a religious sectarian character. These transformations convinced us, in the Party of Communist Action to which I belonged at that time, that the overthrow of this regime would not be peaceful - regardless of the strength of the mass movement that would work to get rid of it without resorting to military action - and would take the form of desertions from the army, which would be the main factor confronting the violence of the regime and its sectarian apparatuses, which resembled militias more than military units.

Several months after the outbreak of the revolution, and of all the violence which accompanied it, which is unprecedented faced with a peaceful movement, with the first desertions from the units of the army, all that confirmed what I thought: that the regime would not go through peaceful methods. I began to think: how can we limit the number of victims in this conflict?

But the character of the militarization of the revolution, which I spoke about in my first answer, went against all predictions. Instead of strengthening the military forces of the revolution, we found ourselves faced with forces which were fighting the regime and which were counter-revolutionary before their victory.

That is why it makes no sense to ask if you are for or against militarization. The overthrow of the regime is the only way to get rid of the conflict that is taking place today and is the first step to take in order to get rid of the armed counter-revolutionary forces. Maintaining the regime would mean the continuation of the civil war for the next hundred years ...

Permanent Revolution: Some analysts consider that the main factor that has catalyzed the popular movement since the beginning was the demand for freedom and human dignity in the confrontation with this repugnant dictatorial regime, while others emphasize the socio-economic factor and make that the decisive factor in this process. How do you see this question?

Munif Mulhem: There is no doubt that the last decade has seen substantial socio-economic changes in Syria, changes which began in the late 1990, and that the late 1980s represented the biggest step in these transformations, whose basis was the victory of the regime in its confrontation

with the Syrian opposition. After the defeat of the Islamist armed forces, the regime sought to destroy all the currents of the opposition, whether they were the democratic forces or those of the Left, and a climate of fear and terror was established throughout society. We can say that Syria at the end of the 1980s had become a big prison and a dreadful prospect for its people.

The victors, whether we are talking about the governing bureaucracy or civilians and soldiers, considered that they had to be paid for their victory. Corruption spread in a way that was unprecedented, wealth was accumulated and a new rich layer emerged which openly exhibited the billions it had accumulated and led a luxurious life that was provocative for the mass of people who saw their conditions of existence deteriorating rapidly. The middle class, the bulk of which was made up of state functionaries, was eclipsed. Similarly, the new liberal transformations, through the opening up of markets and the abandonment by the state of the guarantee of opportunities for graduates of universities and institutes, the enactment of legislation establishing a market economy, all that dealt blows to the middle class, artisans and small manufacturers. The Human Development Report for 2005, published in Syria in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, showed that poverty was spreading to the point that almost one third of the inhabitants of Syria were living on the threshold of poverty and nearly three million were living below it. It is well known that the majority of them are concentrated in rural areas, particularly in the North.

Socio-economic transformations in Syria were an important factor in the outbreak of the revolution, but in my opinion they were not the main factor. The blind and savage repression, the violations of the slightest forms of freedom and human dignity, which reached their peak in the 1980s, the fear that was instilled in society, religious discrimination between citizens, are essential factors in the unleashing of the revolution.

And the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain opened the doors for activists to break down the wall of fear built up by the regime for four decades. Thus, the slogan of the revolution for freedom and dignity was the most consistent expression of the wishes of the revolutionaries.

Permanent Revolution The dissident elements of the regular army, and especially the officers, were sidelined in the brigades and combat units, whether in the so-called Free Syrian Army, or on the level of brigades and other units. How should we understand this phenomenon and to what extent is it fair to establish a link with a regional tendency, to be more precise, for differentiation based on religious sectarianism to dominate the character of the struggle?

Munif Mulhem: What was strikingly evident in the first months of the revolution, what was the feature that was most widespread among peace activists, was that there was no affiliation to a political force or parties that existed prior to the revolution. Most of the soldiers who had deserted from the army at the beginning of the militarization of the revolution did not belong either to a political current, even as sympathizers, with the exception of the Baath Party, which all volunteer soldiers were required to join if they wanted to stay in the army and to get promotion. This experience dissuaded them from any kind of commitment on the political and organizational level.

For this reason, the Islamic forces, supported by regional forces, organized themselves to create their own specific military formations, which can be considered to be the most influential and to be hegemonic over the revolution. We witnessed the training of hundreds of units and brigades with an Islamic ideological character. The regime in turn freed hundreds of Salafists who had been arrested in the first months of the revolution (many of whom became leaders of Salafist units and brigades) and at the same time it was arresting thousands of young peaceful activists. The regime claimed from the first months of the revolution that it was fighting religion-based military organizations and

takfiris (Salafists). These regional and local forces provided the regime with what did not in reality exist. And they contributed to the marginalization of units and brigades created by military deserters, and in some cases physically liquidated those who demonstrated their refusal of practices that were far removed from the objectives and the moral content of the revolution.

Permanent Revolution: How do you explain the absence of an effective Left in the leadership of the movement, especially after its militarization? What is the Left's influence on the general course taken by the current process of the struggle?

Munif Mulhem: It is no secret for anyone that the influence of the Left in Syria before the revolution was weak, due mainly to two factors. The first is specific: it is the result of the repression that struck the Left over the past decades. The second is general and relates to the state of the Left on a world level after the collapse of the "socialist bloc" in the 1990s. The intensity of the repression against the popular movement, which forced it to move from pacifism and civil struggle to militarization, closed the door to all that remained of left forces to have a presence and to have influence in the revolution. I think the Left will only be able to play an effective role in Syria and go back to the democratic stage of peaceful action after the fall of the regime. Syrian society, even if it appears, from a distance, to be overwhelmed by the forces of the Right, keeps in reserve, in my opinion, a quantity of forces capable of moving society forward - towards the building of a modern democratic civil state - and of repairing a society that has disintegrated.

Permanent Revolution: Do you still believe, as you have said in the past, that the scenarios of division, in which Iran is participating, could lead to the establishment of a Alawite micro-state, if the current regime lost any possibility of maintaining itself? What are the chances of a partition?

Munif Mulhem: To be precise, this is what I said in the interview cited on this subject: "The fall of the regime is an unavoidable outcome and the situation opens up all the possibilities, the worst being partition, which can be envisaged because it suits regional forces, principally Iran, which would like to see the creation of an allied Alawite state. But the chances of partition are not great, because a large part of the reasons for an intervention by regional or international forces in the Syrian situation is an attempt to weaken Iran in Syria and erase it definitively from the region."

Today, following the developments in Syria, in particular the role attributed to jihadist extremist forces and the role played by international forces, the risk of partition is much smaller than before. This unlikely outcome, if it materialized, would not result in an Alawite state, but in cantons for the armed forces, of which the Alawite canton would only be one among many.

Permanent Revolution: In the interview in question, you said that you had supported, in the beginning, albeit critically, the Syrian National Council. Is that still your position now with the emergence of the "National Coalition" which does not, it seems, enjoy the confidence of a significant part of the Syrian people, nor the general recognition of the fighting units and brigades, judging by what they have recently published? Do you consider that there is an urgent need to crystallize a different leadership structure that actually represents the interests of the Syrian people, that manages to polarize it, to organize its struggle, to unify its ranks, which could then lead to victory? And if this is on the agenda, what do you think are the conditions for achieving it?

Munif Mulhem: To be clearer: after the establishment of the National Council and the Coordinating Committee, I announced during a conference that the Council did not represent me but that I strongly supported it. The critical position is supported, including in an organization to which I belong. It is a different thing to support a political party that circumstances force you to support in

order to confront the other party that you would like to get rid of. This is what is happening at the present time, whether it is a question of the Council or the Coalition, in the absence or the impossibility of constituting an alternative leadership of the struggle to get rid of this regime, in the present circumstances. I was convinced then that political activity of democratic forces, in the shadow of ongoing armed conflict, would have no effective value, which has been confirmed by developments since the beginning of the year 2013 in the conflict in Syria. Peaceful democratic activity in the so-called liberated areas (areas under the domination of armed force) suffered from the same problems as it did in areas under the control of the regime, if not more. As long as we have not got rid of the regime and we have not disarmed the militias, any democratic action will be limited.

Permanent Revolution: Do you think there is a chance of holding Geneva 2, for which the Russians are exerting pressure - especially after the developments relating to chemical weapons which the regime used last summer and which have weakened its position in the conflict - to push the conflicting forces to take part? Knowing that this weakness on the part of the regime is concomitant with the sharpening of contradictions among its opponents? What is your opinion on the proposal by some people in the Syrian opposition, about the need, according to them, for a Syrian Taif agreement? [3]

Munif Mulhem: Geneva will take place sooner or later, but we cannot anticipate its success or its failure. Geneva is suspended from the participating parties. While the forces of the revolution are working for Geneva to dissolve the regime, establish a pluralist democratic state and build a modern civil state for all its citizens, without discrimination or exclusion, active international forces (the Russians and the Americans) are taking a first step to get rid of chemical weapons, as an element of the threats to the "state" of Israel, regardless of the state that exists in Syria today or will in the future, and to confront the extremist Islamist forces. And that means them maintaining Assad in power at this stage, on condition of creating the conditions to get rid of Assad subsequently, while keeping his regime.

As for talking about Taif, or comparing Geneva to it to end the conflict in Syria, that is not acceptable. Political "Maronism" in Lebanon, despite its defects, is less bad than the regime that has existed in Syria for decades [4]. The regime that ruled Lebanon after independence saw the greatest degree of political freedoms, if we compare it to all the regimes in the Arab region, and "political Maronism" was based on control over the workings of the state, considering that it was a state whose institutions were shared out from a religious perspective. In Syria it is very different, the state institutions are cardboard cut-out structures. What significance has a Prime Minister or a President of the Parliament? The revolution is coming, not to share power, but to eradicate a dictatorial regime whose worst achievement was to break the social fabric. A "Syrian Taif" would not bring back the cohesion that was broken by the regime, but would consolidate the situation in different forms. It would be worse than partition, in my opinion.

Permanent Revolution: Despite all the distortions of the uprising of the Syrian people, we have talked up to now about its multiple forms and manifestations of their leaders, whether in terms of the practices of the existing regime or the practices of groups that are confronting it on the ground. In your answers you use expressions such as "revolution" or "revolutionary forces". Can you clarify exactly what are the "forces of revolution" that you are talking about? Furthermore, what do you think of the forms, even embryonic and persecuted, of self-organization, in areas outside the control of the regime? Is there in your opinion a possibility of them developing, in the service of the revolutionary process in Syria?

Munif Mulhem: I think the main point, on which Syrians were agreed from the beginning of their movement in March 2011 until the end of that year (before the formation of the various Islamic brigades) was that whatever and whoever demanded the fall of the regime and the building of a state of freedom and dignity, a state without discrimination between its citizens, was a force of the revolution. These forces included all the layers, classes and sections of society, as well as political forces, to differing degrees.

As regards the possibility of building self-organization in areas outside the control of the regime, I said, at a conference I attended in May 2013, that we could not speak of “liberated areas,” especially those from which the forces of the regime had been evacuated. Well, the recent period proves that the expression does not correspond to the reality of these areas. It would be more appropriate to speak of “areas under the control of the armed opposition.” The hegemony of armed force over these areas, alongside legitimate structures, makes the question of human rights something whose achievement is difficult. So if respect for human rights is difficult to achieve how could self-organization of the forces of the revolution be possible? Experiences on the ground, by activists in Raqqa, in the suburbs of Aleppo, in Idleb, in the Ghouta neighbourhood in Damascus, have made it clear that such a project was almost impossible in the presence of the domination of armed forces.

Interview conducted on 1 December 2013

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Footnotes

[1] Munif Mulhem, born in Homs in 1951, was an officer in the surface-to-air branch of the armed forces, between 1970 and 1973, when he was dismissed from the army, accused of Marxism. He was one of the founders of the League of Communist Action (Syria) and a member of its Central Committee and its Political Bureau between 1977 and 1981. Then he participated in the founding congress which took the decision to transform the League into “Party of Communist Action.” He was arrested a few days after the close of the congress and remained in prison until 1997. He founded, along with young Marxist, the Left Forum for Dialogue, in what was called the Damascus Spring (2000-2001) and then at the end of 2002 , the Movement against Capitalist Globalization, which published seven issues of the publication *The Alternative*. He is currently fighting to build a new Marxist movement in Syria, working together with the international Left to build another world, a world of justice, freedom and human dignity.

[2] One of the most important units of the Free Syrian Army, the brigade is named after Farouq Omar ibn al-Khattab, a “Sahaba” (companion) of the Prophet Muhammad and second caliph. Peoples in their struggle for change borrow what they believe to be honourable pages of their history, and return to symbols and events of it; they will even go so far as to adopt the dress of the period.

[3] The Taif Agreement was an inter-Lebanese Treaty, signed on 22 October 1989, aimed at ending the Lebanese civil war that had lasted since 1975. It is presented as an attempt to restore

peace through a cease-fire and national reconciliation. Negotiated in Taif in Saudi Arabia, it was the result of the political efforts of a committee composed of King Hassan II of Morocco, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and President Chadli of Algeria, with the support of US diplomacy.

[4] "Maronism" is a reference to the Maronite Christian component of Lebanese society