

COMMENT

Syria's revolutionaries return to the streets - The left must stand in solidarity

Saturday 27 August 2016, by [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 10 March 2016).

Ashley Smith explains the context for the recent resurgence of mass protest in Syria.

DURING THE calm following a partial truce, Syrian revolutionaries returned to the streets for mass protests in rebel-held areas of the country for the first time since 2013. On March 4, they resumed their tradition of Friday demonstrations, staging more than 100 actions under the slogan "The Revolution Continues."

Waving the three-starred, tricolor flag that has become the symbol of the uprising, thousands of protesters filled the streets of Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Daraa. They chanted, "Five years after the beginning of the revolution, the people still want the downfall of the regime." The blog Syria Freedom Forever has documented with pictures and videos the heroism, determination and celebratory mood of these protests [[1](#)].

In their actions on March 4, they reasserted their central demand, which, as one activist told reporters, is for "the downfall of the regime." They chanted slogans that stirred the revolution at its start in 2011, like "The Syrian people want freedom," "Revolution for dignity and freedom" and the democratic and anti-sectarian chant, "The people are one and united."

"With this truce, we have the opportunity to express why we came out to the streets in the first place, which is the downfall of the regime," declared Abu Nadim in the besieged city of Aleppo, where hundreds of militants took to the streets. He explained that he and others wanted to show the world that Syrians were not "armed gangs, but a people demanding freedom."

At the protest in Talbisseh, Hasaan Abu Nuh told reporters:

"You could say we've gone back to the beginning. The people are so, so happy. There was crying, there was joy, but there was also a lump in people's throats. There were a lot of young guys that used to protest with us who weren't there today because they've been killed."

THESE DEMONSTRATIONS have come as a surprise to many, especially those on the left who have denounced the Syrian revolution as an American plot designed to install a pro-U.S. client regime in Damascus.

In truth, as Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami explain in their book *Burning Country*, Syrians revolted against the oppressive regime of Bashar al-Assad for the very same reasons their brothers and sisters did in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere throughout the Middle East and North Africa in 2011.

The Syrian uprising was an expression of mass disillusionment with the Assad regime and an

unwillingness to continue tolerating dictatorship, neoliberalism, poverty and repression. And once they saw the precedent of successful revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, they rose in up in mass demonstrations of tens of thousands to demand democracy, freedom and equality. To retain his hold on the country, Assad turned to divide-and-rule tactics to split the uprising along sectarian and ethnic lines.

He denounced the protests as a “foreign” and “sectarian” plot to organize the Sunni majority against the Christian and Alawite minority, which forms the basis of his regime. To give this lie credibility, he went so far as to release 1,500 Sunni jihadists from his jails, many of whom went on to form militias that did indeed conduct sectarian attacks.

He also ceded control of the Kurdish areas in the country’s north to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG). Assad did this not out of some commitment to Kurdish autonomy, let alone independence. He has in fact long oppressed the Kurds, denying hundreds of thousands citizenship and periodically repressing their parties and protests. In reality, he granted the PYD control in order to keep it from joining the wider uprising.

When these measures did not quell the revolt, Assad turned to a policy of scorched-earth war on the predominantly Sunni resistance. He retreated from liberated areas and deployed his air force to bomb whole cities to smithereens. He went so far as to use chemical weapons on civilians.

Assad thus left the Syrian Revolution no choice but to arm itself in self-defense. Activists and soldiers that had defected from Assad’s military formed the Free Syrian Army. This loose collection of militias numbers over 150,000.

The militias expanded liberated territory, which was governed in part by Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). These not only helped organize the revolution but have replaced the retreating state, administering hospitals, schools, garbage collection and even elections.

While the U.S. postured that it was supporting the FSA, in no way did it support the revolution. Its policy was to co-opt the largely expatriate formation, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, in order to carry out an “orderly transition,” which would get rid of Assad and incorporate a layer of the opposition, but preserve the existing state.

Thus, the U.S. refused to give the FSA the heavy armaments like anti-aircraft weaponry it needed to defend itself against Assad’s aerial bombardment, fearing that such weaponry would ultimately degrade the state that the U.S. wanted to preserve.

Assad’s regional opponents, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, funded various Islamist forces within the revolution. Following a similar arc of development, al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria, the Nusra Front, emerged alongside ISIS, which used its victories in Iraq to provide funds and forces to seize territory in Syria. ISIS in particular turned its guns not on Assad, but on the revolutionaries in a counterrevolutionary effort to build its caliphate.

DESPITE BEING faced with counterrevolution from Assad and ISIS, the revolution asserted control over growing swaths of Syria. With the regime on the brink of collapse in late 2015, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah intervened to save Assad. Together, they provided air power and ground forces for the regime in Syria to reassert control in its strongholds as well as launch offensives—under Russian air cover—against rebel-held areas.

These combined forces of counterrevolution have laid waste to the country. The Assad regime, not ISIS, has killed the vast majority of the 470,000 people who have lost their lives since 2011. The regime bears the main share of responsibility for driving half the population of 22 million from their

homes—7 million are now internally displaced, 4 million fled to other countries in the region, and more than 1 million departed for Europe.

Outfoxed by Russia and fearing that the wave of refugees could provoke a political crisis in the EU, the U.S. brokered the recent ceasefire. Having abandoned its demand for Assad to immediately step down, the U.S. has organized a new round of peace talks set to begin March 10 in Geneva.

But the Syrian people have other plans in mind—to continue the revolution. The stunning display of resilience by Syria’s revolutionaries amid incredibly difficult conditions is a rebuke to all those who declared the Syrian revolution as “jihadist” and/or “pro-U.S.”

But the struggle ahead will not be easy. The protests confront Assad and his Russian backers, but also a fifth column in the revolt—al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front and ISIS. Thus, when revolutionaries demonstrated in Idlib on March 4, they were confronted by Nusra, which had seized control of the city in March 2015.

“The al-Nusra fighters came out and began to fight the protesters, to threaten them with their guns saying, ‘If you don’t leave the streets, we’ll start to fire,’” explained activist Ibrahim al-Idlibi. The jihadists proceeded to detain 10 revolutionaries for several hours, provoking widespread condemnation on social media. Undeterred, Idlibi stated that while the city remained tense, activists were planning on organizing more protests “against anyone that oppresses the Syria people, from Nusra on down.”

With Russia backing Assad’s counterrevolution, the U.S. angling to co-opt revolutionaries into a superficially reconfigured version of the old regime, and Europe and the rest of the world shutting their doors to the wave of refugees, the re-emergence of popular protest offers the best hope for a solution in Syria.

Syrians will have to find a way to re-forge solidarity across ethnic and religious divisions and unite in a common struggle. Internationally, the left must stand in solidarity with their efforts and also demand that their countries open the borders to the desperate victims of Assad counter-revolution.

Ashley Smith

P.S.

* Socialist Worker. March 10, 2016:

<https://socialistworker.org/2016/03/10/syrias-revolutionaries-return-to-streets>

Footnotes

[1] <https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2016/03/07/demonstrations-in-aleppo-deraa-and-jubar-7-03-2016-␣-␣␣␣-␣-␣␣␣␣-␣␣␣-␣␣-␣␣␣␣␣/>