

Interview

Lessons of the Syrian Revolution - “Wherever there’s struggle, whatever condition it’s in, we need to be part of it”

Tuesday 27 December 2016, by [ASSAF Simon](#), [NAISSE Ghayath](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2016).

Syrian socialist Ghayath Naisse, a member of the Revolutionary Left Current, spoke to Simon Assaf about the brutalisation of Syria, the goals of those intervening and the prospects for socialists in the region. [1]

Simon Assaf: Let’s start with imperialism. What do those intervening in Syria—Russia, the Saudis, the US and Turkey—hope to achieve?

Ghayath Naisse: Syria makes for a very particular case study in that virtually all the imperialist and regional powers are in action in the same territory.

First, let’s talk about the intervention by Russia and its allies. Russian imperialism has an important geostrategic interest in the region. After Libya, Syria is now the last bastion where Russia has had a military presence for decades. It has the naval base at Tartus, which has grown in recent years, and the air base at Hmeimim near Latakia. So, on a geostrategic level, if it loses Syria, Russia has no presence and no conduit for diplomatic influence in the Mediterranean basin.

That particular interest combines with a more general one. Since the ascent of Vladimir Putin, Russia has sought to recover its place among the great powers—to make the other imperialist powers recognise its place among them, by force if necessary. That shaped its actions in Ukraine and it’s also shaping what happens in Syria.

To understand the other imperialist “camp”, the United States and its allies, we must start from seeing that the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 ended in failure and defeat. The departure of US forces in 2011 was a striking show of failure for US imperialism in the whole region and in Iraq in particular. What’s happening now with ISIS has allowed the US to return to the region, not just to Iraq but to Syria too, at least within the limits of a “low cost intervention”. That means it doesn’t need to put its troops on the ground but has a major aerial presence.

So, supposedly to confront ISIS, there has been a return of the US in Iraq. And in Syria, where the US previously had a minimal, largely diplomatic presence, it now intervenes directly. It has special forces around the border and in the north, and an incontestable air supremacy. That is what’s at stake for the US—its interest in returning to a region it had been forced out of. This is an important region for the US, where its allies such as Israel and the Gulf states were threatened by the uprising

and revolutions that swept the region.

Part of the radical left criticises the US policy in the region for “doing nothing”. But that’s not true. The US has intervened; it has acted; it has done something. Its policy for Syria was to let the different groups kill each other on the one hand. But its objective was also to destroy the economic and military capacities of Syria, to the point where the regime—or whatever future regime comes after it—can never constitute any kind of threat to Israel.

It’s worth noting that the US didn’t initially take a firm position on the Syrian Revolution. Barack Obama called for Ben Ali to go after two weeks of the Tunisian Revolution, and for Hosni Mubarak to go after barely one week of the Egyptian Revolution. But his first declaration on Bashar al-Assad was in August 2011—five months after the revolution began.

Foremost among the other regional powers are the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia. In the first month of the Syrian Revolution, Saudi Arabia gave the Assad regime \$3 billion in aid. They saw the breadth and radicalism of the popular uprising, whose dynamics constituted a danger for all the region’s reactionary and dictatorial regimes. When they intervened it was against the regime but also in support of radical Islamist factions, either directly backed by the Saudi state or by a multitude of other organisations it controls. And there was a flow of funding and fighters towards extremist factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. [2] Little by little, with the Free Syrian Army struggling for equipment, these groups came to the fore of the military stage in Syria.

The second point for Saudi Arabia is its rivalry with Iran. Saudi Arabia has seen Iran gain influence in Iraq—thanks, incidentally, to the US intervention—and Iran’s allies Russia and Hizbollah are helping the Syrian regime. [3] So a victory for the regime and Hizbollah over the Syrian Revolution constitutes a threat to Saudi Arabia that would curtail its influence in the region. For Iran, the Syrian regime has been an ally since the First Gulf War—the bloody, deadly conflict between the Iranian regime and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. [4] That war killed and wounded millions and brought great destruction to both countries, with the help of the imperialist powers. Iran also has an interest in preserving a zone of influence that goes from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon. So Iran went in militarily on the side of the regime from the start, and it was followed, timidly at first, by Hizbollah from 2012. In 2013 Hizbollah leader Hasran Nasrallah said they were intervening in Syria to protect the holy sites of Shia Islam against the *Takfiri*. [5] So the Iranian axis was part of the Syrian conflict from the start.

This rivalry inflamed the sectarian aspect of the conflict. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia helped extremist islamists, and, on the other hand, Iran intervened under its own religious slogans. These parties whipped up a religious conflict that hadn’t been present in the Syrian revolution.

For Turkey the stakes are slightly different. The Kurdish question has been the Turkish state’s nightmare since it was founded. The world’s largest Kurdish population is the one within Turkey’s borders. The Syrian Revolution allowed the liberation of the Kurdish people in Syria and brought up the question of Kurdish national liberation.

The Syrian Revolution and the military aspect of the conflict has allowed the Kurdish PYD to control a wide area of what is called Rojava—Syrian Kurdistan, which comprises the three cantons of Jazira, Kobanê and Afrin. [6] However, it lacked some territory between Kobanê and Afrin. The capacity of Kurdish forces and their Arab allies to link up the two cantons would create a de facto continuous and effectively autonomous territory in northern Syria. So Turkey intervened to prevent any such continuity between Jazira and Kobanê in the east and Afrin in the west. It has at least two objectives—to crush the aspiration for Kurdish autonomy in Syria, which has consequences inside Turkey, and to make sure that Syria’s future wouldn’t be decided without Turkey’s active

participation.

Finally, Israel must not be forgotten. From the start in 2011, Ehud Barak made a revealing declaration. [7] He said that Syria must not go the way of Iraq. The regime should be improved, but the Syrian army and the Baath Party must remain intact. [8] Israel wants Syria weakened economically and militarily, but without the regime's fall which would open up an unrestrained civil war threatening Israel and the whole stability of the imperialist order in the region.

What's the nature of the Assad regime?

Historically, it was the army that took power in Syria, with the Baath Party and what we can call the petty bourgeoisie or middle class. Tony Cliff described how, in a situation where both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are weak, the middle class can play a key role, in a kind of upside down revolution. [9]

When the army and the Baath Party took power they represented the middle class in the face of a bourgeoisie that had been weakened, particularly by the Nasser regime's nationalisations and land reforms during the 1958-61 union between Egypt and Syria. [10] The 1950s had seen the growth of the Communists in Syria. The left was strong and challenges from the popular classes were becoming dangerous for both the bourgeoisie and the regime, and the bourgeoisie chose a union with Egypt to try to cut off this radical upsurge. This was a long period of political instability in Syria, with one or two coups d'état almost every year from 1949 onwards.

The Baath regime undertook a series of reforms—particularly under the radical wing of the party, in power from 1966 to 1970—which were relatively positive and the most radical in the region. This further weakened the Syrian bourgeoisie, to the point of collapse.

Hafez al-Assad took power in a coup in 1970 and ruled for 30 years. Initially he played a relatively Bonapartist role. [11] While old social formations were destroyed, the state helped to create new ones. As Marxists we acknowledge the state can influence the development of social classes. The Syrian regime helped forge a "new-old" Syrian bourgeoisie that was closely linked to the state. Top bureaucrats joined through marriage or business ties to the old traditional bourgeoisie. And, through corruption, these bureaucrats became very rich and sought to invest their new wealth back into the economy. So, little by little, the regime began to break the state's economic monopoly, notably with Decree Number 10 in 1991, which opened the economy to private capital. The same corrupt bureaucrats were transformed through their links with the old bourgeoisie, which no longer had the same capacity to invest. They injected their wealth into the tertiary economy in particular—construction, factories, tourism—and from the 1990s became a new bourgeoisie organically linked to the Assad regime.

At the same time Hafez al-Assad oversaw an unspoken but rigid sharing out of positions in the state apparatus along sectarian or regional lines. For example, each of his governments had to include two Druze, a Sunni prime minister and maybe defence minister, etc. [12] And he was able to integrate all the religious hierarchies into the state. Though an atheist, he made sure to be seen praying at mosques in the Sunni manner, taking part in Christian and even Jewish festivals. The fruit of the state's policy was visible in the Syrian Revolution, where the hierarchy of every religion sided with the regime.

The repression prevented the development of political, trade union or NGO activity independent of the regime. And the regime locked up tens of thousands of political opponents and trade unionists for a very long time. One of my cousins was jailed for 25 years—he went in at 33 and came out at 58. People were left to rot in prison for immense periods of time. The regime had a tight grip on society,

and this was a generation that had to be courageous to defy it.

When Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father in 2000, about 11 percent of the population were below the poverty line. After ten years of his rule this had reached 33 percent. That means Bashar al-Assad applied in Syria the most severe, most radical and most monstrous neoliberal policies in the region—worse than Morocco, worse than Egypt, worse even than Jordan. He thought there would be no opposition, no resistance. He thought he'd inherited a society that had been crushed. So he allowed himself to apply social policies that, within ten years, had brought the proportion of the population on about two dollars a day or less to an enormous 50 percent.

How has the revolution changed the nature of the regime?

The war, the interventions, the revolution, the demographic shift, has all changed the nature of the regime. It is now nothing more than the militia of one family and its allies—a faction that forms the hard core of the Syrian bourgeoisie—the militia of a clan at war with the people.

Is it right to say, as some argue, that the revolution has been subsumed by a sectarian conflict?

This is only very partially true. Yes, on the one hand, there are Islamist groups that are reactionary sectarians. On the other hand, the regime too uses sectarian Shia militia such as Hizbollah or Afghan and Iranian militia. This is a reality. But it constitutes perhaps 100,000 or 200,000 people. What is it like for the Syrian people as a whole? Let me tell you firstly in terms of my experiences.

I have been to Syria several times during these years. I received almost no sectarian or religious hostility. In addition we have a handful of comrades who have got out of Syria in the last few months. To do that they had to cross zones controlled by Islamists—and some of these comrades are from religious minorities that Sunni Islamists shouldn't approve of. But they weren't impeded; they weren't beheaded. The population there said: "You are our brothers." One of these comrades spent two months within this zone before he was able to get to Turkey.

The truth is that if this was a sectarian conflict we would have seen sectarian massacres without end. There have been some sectarian massacres, committed first by the regime and then by some Islamist groups. But they are sporadic and limited in scale. So far in the Syrian conflict there have been 600,000 deaths. The number killed in sectarian conflicts has been perhaps 1,100. We haven't seen anyone slaughter a whole village of Alawites, slitting thousands of throats, we haven't seen the blood flowing in the way that would imply. [\[13\]](#) We've seen incidents. But in general it isn't there, and the people aren't spontaneously sectarian. In the region controlled by the regime are people who have been displaced from all over Syria. In Latakia alone they number a million and a half—Sunni and non-Sunni, living among Alawites at a time when Alawite soldiers are dying in their dozens. But have you heard of those Sunni being massacred? No, because it hasn't happened. In terms of the ordinary population, people haven't turned into sectarian monsters just yet.

Saying this has become a religious conflict and there's nothing we can do about it is a facile excuse to abdicate all responsibility for solidarity with the Syrian people's struggle. No, there is a sectarian aspect to what is happening as there are other aspects, but the underlying tendency, the basis of it all, is a popular revolution—one that has seen ups and downs, turning points, imperialist intervention and a scorched earth war by the regime, one that has seen a retreat for the popular movement, but not one that we can say is all over.

What is currently happening with the forces of the revolution and the different armed groups?

First, let's look at the Free Syrian Army we hear so much about. Lots of observers make an error when they talk about the Free Syrian Army as if it's an army that's organised and has a command structure. It's actually a generic label that covers diverse phenomena. To understand what it is we can look back to how it started. With the militarisation of the uprising, from the second half of 2011 onwards, we began to observe two phenomena taking place.

On the one hand some of the people who were protesting and getting shot at like birds by the regime's soldiers, decided to take up arms and protect themselves. These were individuals who brought guns along to protect the demonstrations. At the same time there were growing numbers of desertions from the army. In late 2011 and especially 2012 there were 20,000-30,000 soldiers who deserted with their weapons. From these phenomena the Free Syrian Army was created.

It was much like what we call the coordinations. In every neighbourhood, every village, every one-horse hamlet, people organised themselves and created coordinations that called demonstrations, decided their route, agreed their slogans, planned escape routes in case regime forces arrived and organised the treatment and evacuation of the wounded. These were a local phenomenon, and that was both their weakness and their strength. It was a weakness because they always lacked a network that could coordinate on a national level. But it also helped them to survive longer—it's very hard for the regime to crush something so localised and multiple.

The Free Syrian Army, similarly, was really a combination of deserters and ordinary people who took up arms in their local areas. There was little coordination between them. The regional powers helped to create something as well, but this was a real phenomenon of the people. Again, their localism was both their weakness and their strength. Even today in Syria there are still 3,000 "armed groups" aside from the big Islamist organisations—these are really the ones that were best organised, but the phenomenon at its peak was much broader.

Who was it in Al-Zabadani who had to be evacuated? [\[14\]](#) Did you hear about them? It was ordinary people in the countryside around Damascus; it was the Free Syrian Army; it was little local groups here and there who defended themselves when they were thrown into the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra. The regime played a clever game in throwing them to Al Qaeda—it allowed it to say there is only Al Qaeda and ISIS fighting us, and Al Qaeda has to be destroyed.

The phenomenon of the popular resistance has actually not had any solidarity from the regional powers because the people in arms are a dangerous thing for them. They give to a few groups, carefully identified and on their payroll.

Alongside this we have the Kurdish forces—the PYD and its People's Protection Units, that already have decades of guerrilla experience in Turkey and in the mountains. It was the only Kurdish party with its own military power. With the withdrawal of the regime from some areas of northern Syria in 2012, these forces—linked to the PKK—seized them immediately and consolidated their military presence. This took place from July 2012, and it was followed by a dynamic of self-administration and the creation and development of the Women's Protection Units. Last year they allied with some battalions of the Free Syrian Army to form the Democratic Syria Force, a Kurdish-Arab or Arab-Kurdish force in the north of Syria. We are in a close fraternal dialogue with part of this grouping in particular, a democratic nationalist alliance including Assyrians, Turkmen and Arabs, with a presence to the north and the west of Aleppo. [\[15\]](#)

After that you have the most powerful Islamist groups. If we leave ISIS to one side—because for me it is a separate phenomenon—there are two main powers. One is Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist militia which wants a Salafist, Jihadist regime, but with this difference: it doesn't want to impose the Islamic state straight away but to get it some time in the future and in the meantime call people to

religion. And there is Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly al-Nusra. It is the biggest power, and has an important military strength north of Aleppo, in Aleppo itself and around Idlib. In and around Damascus there is also Jaysh al-Islam, a militia that's sort of the fiefdom of the family of Zahran Alloush, who was assassinated by the Russians in 2015.

What's happening in the south around Daraa?

The Daraa region has this specificity—its geography is a rat trap. For groups there, it can go two ways. If the Jordanian regime opens the border, they can breathe; if it closes the border, they are smothered between the Syrian regime and Jordan. This geography makes them very sensitive to the border policies of the Jordanian regime.

A lot of battalions of the Free Syrian Army have found themselves compelled by the search for solidarity, munitions, arms and medical treatment for the wounded to become very dependent on Jordan. Right now Jordan doesn't want a war, and it is turning that tap off. So those people can't really do much else or they will be crushed.

Do the popular committees formed during the revolution still exist? What are they doing?

The important thing that characterised the Syrian revolution was that it was able to create—or the popular masses were able to create—organs of self-organisation. These were the local coordinations we've discussed already and, from 2012 onwards, what are called civil councils or local councils, the organs of self-administration for running everyday life. In 2011, 2012 and even some of 2013, this was an immense phenomenon. Wherever the regime wasn't present—and even in some places where it was—there were these two organs of self-organisation and self-administration.

However, 2013 brought, on the one hand, ISIS and the advance of reactionary and sectarian Islamist groups and, on the other, the unprecedented violence of the regime. This was the point where it truly began to apply with savagery a war of scorched earth, destroying infrastructure and buildings. This was when the waves of Syrian refugees really began to grow, from 2013 onwards. It was also when these councils and coordinations were weakened, with the people who had been running them dead, displaced or made refugees. This is why we speak of the advance of the counter-revolution from 2013 and with it the retreat of the popular movement.

Retreat doesn't mean disappearance.

Today, just an hour ago, there was a popular demonstration in the town of Zakieh near Damascus. Today there are still some coordinations, albeit weakened. The popular movement isn't dead. Each time the guns go quiet the popular masses re-emerge; they are reborn. We see this despite the destruction, despite the war, despite the massacre, despite the displacement and the exodus.

That still exists today but it is very weak. We take part in some coordination committees in very difficult conditions, and there are still some local councils that are still active. Though the organisations of the movement have been pushed back and severely weakened, they survive.

This is the big question: what is to be done? What is the strategy of the revolutionary left in Syria?

The short-term perspective of our revolutionary socialist organisation in Syria, the Revolutionary Left Current, involves several tasks. Of course, we need to survive—to conserve the strength that we have and recruit new activists. Secondly, we need to take part in all the struggles that take place, in the surviving coordinations and councils. Wherever there's struggle, whatever condition it's in, we need to be part of it. However difficult the conditions our task is to participate in the struggles while

building the party. Our newspaper is produced in Syria. When you look at it, there are some printing errors, spelling mistakes and bad grammar—and so what? The important thing is that it's the activists there, not us in exile, who are producing and distributing it. It's a learning experience, in conditions where there is rarely electricity. [16]

That's one half of it. The other is that we need to create a united front, bringing together all the forces of the left and all the democratic and revolutionary forces in Syria. This could be a different pole of attraction from either the bourgeois opposition, the regime and its allies or the Islamist extremists. We've made a few steps in that direction, despite the difficulties. We've announced an agreement of cooperation with the Democratic Alliance, which itself involves several parties including the old Communists. We need such a front to shape what is happening both today and in the longer term. For us, it's important to prepare for the period that is to come. The current state of affairs cannot last forever. The moment will come when the war and the bombing stops, and when it does we will need to be ready. We will need the strength to root ourselves in the population, in the popular classes. We'll need to be with them to ensure that Syria's fate isn't decided by the regional or imperialist powers or by the Syrian bourgeoisie.

Creating that balance of forces starts today. So these are what we call the three "feet" our work stands on—being in the struggles of the masses, building the party, and forming a united front of democratic forces. Of course, we also call out our slogans, saying: "Neither Washington nor Moscow, neither Riyadh nor Ankara nor Tehran". This is to educate the people, to underline that the solution won't come from those powers but the Syrian people themselves who must decide their own destiny. And it's to put pressure on the bourgeois opposition that is negotiating with the regime, so that they don't accept a continuation of the regime with a few tweaks and a few posts for themselves.

We need to deepen the struggles of the Syrian masses to get the deepest, most democratic social and political change. That will be a very long fight, so we need to build up our forces to keep fighting for a long time to come.

Are you pessimistic or optimistic?

I'm very optimistic, contrary to the general mood. The battle is hard. But look, our revolution has been going for six years. What lessons have those six years brought?

First, that we can revolt, that the regime cannot simply crush the popular will, whatever it throws at it and whatever allies it finds. Something is broken in the regime. Something has ended. If the Americans and the Russians and the rest impose on us a situation where Bashar al-Assad and his clan continue to reign, they will never again be able to reign like before.

The regime survives with a so-called "loyalist" milieu, consisting of over ten million people, almost half the population, still under its control. And those people have a hatred, a real hatred, of that regime. Their daily life is martyrdom. There are immense demonstrations against the regime and the Assad family. There are great explosions ahead, and this is where they will happen. Where the regime thinks it is most stable is where it is the least so. The days when someone could rule the Syrian people saying, "shut your mouths, I will do what I want", are over.

Then there's been the lesson of experience. Long ago, if you were one of the "old" revolutionary socialists and you wanted to talk about socialism, you could say we want a workers' state based on workers' and peasants' councils and all that. People would ask questions, so you could say, this has happened, at least for a moment, in Germany, in Hungary and most importantly in Russia. You could say all that, but it was a very long way from people's experience. Now all that is much simpler. Self-organisation is something people understand because of the coordinations. The Syrian people,

without reading Lenin or Marx or Trotsky, have done this already in their struggles. So when we talk of workers' and peasants' councils they understand it because they've done it; it's their lived experience.

The third lesson concerns the Islamist forces. They always used to say Islam is the solution. That hypothesis is now exhausted in Syria. People have seen what it looks like when religious Islamist forces impose their model of government. That argument has been put to the test and failed.

What's left is socialism. It's down to us. We believe that this is the only solution, the most humanist and most egalitarian, for the masses of Syria and of everywhere else. The struggle continues.

Ghayath Naisse

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Thanks to Dave Sewell for his work on the transcription of this interview.

[2] Jabhat al-Nusra was the Syrian organisation of Al Qaeda, which subsequently broke from the latter and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham al-Islamiyya. Ahrar al-Sham is another Islamist militia, currently allied with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

[3] Hizbollah is a Shia Islamist militia and political party based in Lebanon.

[4] The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88

[5] akfiri is a derogatory Arabic term for a Muslim who accuses others of being unbelievers. It is often used to describe groups such as ISIS.

[6] the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party) is a Kurdish party in northern Syria allied to the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Workers' Party), the main Kurdish organisation in Turkey.

[7] Barak, a former Israeli prime minister, was minister of defence from 2007-13.

[8] The Baath Party, to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs, has been the Syrian ruling party since the coup of 1963 and is discussed in more detail below.

[9] This is a reference to Tony Cliff's theory of deflected permanent revolution, detailed in a

pamphlet of the same name and available online here:

www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1963/xx/permrev.htm

[10] Anne Alexander wrote about Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in issue 112 of this journal. Available on ESSF (article 10608), [The 1956 Suez Crisis, Nasser and the high tide of Arab nationalism](#).

[11] The term “Bonapartist” derives from Karl Marx’s analysis of the regime of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in France, which managed to establish itself in a coup d’état when the contesting class forces unleashed by the 1848 revolutions exhausted themselves.

[12] The Druze are a religious minority found mainly in Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

[13] The Alawites are members of a branch of Shia Islam, found mainly in Syria and Turkey, to which Assad belongs.

[14] Al-Zabadani is a small city on the border with Lebanon.

[15] Assyrians and Turkmen are both minority groups in the Syrian population.

[16] The RLC, founded in Syria October 2011, publish in Syria a monthly called *Frontline*.