

Syria: the question of arming the rebels

Friday 30 August 2013, by [KARADJIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2013).

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The general outline of what initially occurred in Syria is largely agreed upon, even by those who subsequently turned hostile to the revolution: a peaceful mass movement for democracy began in cities and towns across Syria in early 2011 against the dictatorship of President Assad II, and the regime met these protests with ruthless state violence.

It is also largely agreed that this situation continued for some 8 months, protestors baring their chests to Assad's machine guns, tanks and heavy artillery, alongside targeted torture and killings of key activists.

When the masses could no longer bear this situation, they began taking up arms in self-defense, while rank and file soldiers and officers refused to fire on their brothers and sisters, and defected [1]. Out of these defected troops and armed citizens arose the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Once arms are taken up, however, those holding a vastly different view of what is occurring in Syria begin to raise their heads and to gain a greater influence over leftist opinion. This view states that, whatever the initial situation, the armed struggle has now degenerated into a foreign (imperialist and Gulf-state) orchestrated brutal insurgency aimed at destroying Syria, led by reactionary Islamist elements, including Al-Qaida.

They point to some of the more obviously terroristic actions, such as bombings that targeted civilians in Damascus, as evidence that it has become a war against the Syrian people, as well as a Sunni sectarian war against minorities, and a fundamentalist war against secularism, rather than a war by the Syrian people against the regime.

Even many who have always opposed the Assad regime and well-knew how phony its alleged "anti-imperialist" credentials were turned either to a tactical defense of the regime as a "shield" against something worse, or to a "plague on both your houses" view—both sides are reactionary, both commit atrocities against the people.

What it misses is the fundamental difference on the ground, regardless of geopolitical struggles among regional powers: the Syrian revolution, the democratic revolt against the dictatorship, *is still the fundamental fact*.

Countless reports from liberated towns about the nature of this democratic process, under attack from the dictatorship, for example in Taftanaz [2], Saraqeb [3], Qusayr [4], the Damascus suburb Duma [5] and elsewhere, are examples which deal with the real world difficulties of revolutionary democratic governance from below, but nevertheless reveal some semblance of popular structures that deserve defending against the dictatorship and its tanks, Scuds and torture chambers, and which do not show evidence of imposition of sharia law or sectarian cleansing of minorities

However, armed conflict, whatever its origins, does have the potential to corrupt a movement, whether via revenge war-crimes, an over-reliance on military means, the enhancement of existing sectarian dynamics, the boost it may give to irrational ideologies (eg jihadism), and the avenues it gives to foreign interference.

Such negatives cannot negate a democratic revolution as such, unless we live in a dream-world [6]. Indeed, massive regime violence is likely to have its reflection, to some extent, among the anti-regime forces. However, if they reach a certain level and are combined, the conflict could simply become a civil war between two equally undemocratic forces.

While all these factors exist at serious levels and should not be underestimated, it would be extremely premature to make this conclusion.

The formal leaderships of the Syrian opposition, based in exile, have little or no control over the grass-roots political and military opposition inside Syria. On the positive side, this means they will not be very effective tools as the US tries to hijack the movement via these leaderships; but the negative side of this is that wayward elements that commit war crimes are also difficult to control and punish. Nevertheless, it is important that the rebel leaderships have continually and vigorously condemned all such violations [7], for example their condemnation of the well-publicised bite at the heart of a dead regime soldier by a rebel enraged at the soldier's videos [8] of his rape and murder of a mother and her daughters [9]. The Code of Conduct [10], drawn up by the main grass-roots leadership, the Local Coordination Committees (LCC's), and signed by dozens of FSA battalions, shows the lengths to which revolutionary forces have gone to try to rein in such activity.

There is however clearly a minority of truly reactionary forces which do threaten an anti-democratic religious dictatorship. The recent murder of a 15-year old in Aleppo for "blasphemy" is an example of this. This murder was vigorously condemned by the opposition Syrian Coalition, which called for punishment of the killers and described it as a "crime against humanity." While clearly growing stronger, there is no evidence that this trend has come to dominate the movement.

Throwing the whole Syrian uprising into the "jihadi" camp undermines the very forces within the revolution that confront this reactionary trend on a daily basis [11]. The recent assassination of an FSA leader by Al-Qaida in Syria, and the FSA's declaration that this meant "war" with these forces, further highlights this situation [12].

In a nutshell, the situation on the side of the revolution is still fluid, there is still struggle, the reactionary forces by no means dominate. In this context, their right to access arms from abroad should hardly be in question, confronted as they are by such a powerfully armed state machine, which bombs its own towns and cities with scud missiles, fighter planes and helicopters and the whole array of state power, reducing much of Syria to moonscapes (see for example Syria Witness [13]). Even more so considering that most arms flowing into Syria are in fact Russian and Iranian arms further bolstering the regime.

However, since the countries furnishing some arms to the rebels at present (reactionary Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar), and the countries likely to provide any arms in future (the

US or other imperialist states), have reactionary agendas, it may be argued that they will inevitably bend the Syrian revolutionary struggle to their ends if the Syrians accept their arms.

These states' agendas are primarily to hijack the revolution and/or divert it along a path that better serves their interests than democratic revolution. Some in the Gulf prefer pushing reactionary Sunni jihadism and sectarianism; in contrast, the US tends to see these hard Islamist elements as a worse alternative to Assad, and aims to control a section of the exile leadership and push it into a deal with elements of the Assad regime, especially its security apparatus, to create a so-called "Yemeni solution." In fact, to get them to prove their worth, the US is pushing mainstream rebels to prematurely launch war on the jihadists [14].

But not many movements in the real world, confronted by massive state violence, have much choice about who to get arms from, even though they come with a price. Merely receiving arms from someone has never been the final determinant of the nature of the movement on the ground, whether it was secular Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s getting arms from Iran, Iraqi Kurds in the 1970s from the CIA and the Shah, Ho Chi Minh negotiating for US support in 1945 or the Irish uprising in 1916 getting support from Germany. What is fundamental is the actual nature of the movement on the ground and degree to which it continues to represent the legitimate aspirations of the masses for democratic change.

Ironically, it is the extreme reluctance of western states to provide arms to the Syrian opposition that has allowed the Gulf states to provide arms to reactionary Islamist forces. Islamist fighters are better armed than mainstream secular rebels; reports show some FSA rebels crossing over to Al-Nusra for this reason. Despite much talk about arms going to Syrian rebels, most reports show them starved for arms, and those arms that do reach them are light arms, little threat to the massive heavy military equipment Assad is throwing at them.

The US uses the strength of these Islamist forces as its key argument for refusing to arm the rebels, claiming any arms it sends to "friendly" rebels may end up with radical Islamists. This is then countered by the argument that it must start sending some arms to vetted rebels precisely in order to bolster the non-Islamist rebels. Yet in reality we still see hardly any US arms getting to the rebels. Indeed, the main US intervention has been stationing CIA units in Turkey and Jordan to prevent weapons from the Gulf reaching the rebels), especially weapons that would actually be useful, such as anti-aircraft weapons. [15] for trying to split the anti-Assad forces; they'll confront the Islamists on their own terms, but won't let the US tell them what to do.

Nonetheless, despite Syrian rebels having the right to get whatever weapons they need, there may be legitimate questions about the effectiveness of receiving extra arms. Given the sheer horror of continuing war for all, and the regime's enormous military superiority, extra arms may make little real difference to the actual battle, but instead may merely prolong the fighting, or even escalate it, as it will in turn encourage Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to supply even more weapons and fighters to the regime.

It is true that more arms in themselves will not win the revolution. In the big cities, Damascus and Aleppo, military stalemate has long ago been reached, with significant sections of the middle class sticking to the regime against the largely rural-based insurgency which has only won over the poorer areas of the cities; while important minorities, particularly most Alawites, Assad's own sect, and many Christians, have stuck to the regime. War crimes, undemocratic actions and the rise of the Sunni jihadist section of the movement have led these sectors to grudgingly stick with the regime or at least remain neutral. They will need to be politically won over, and the important problems with the parts of the rebel leadership and ranks currently prevent this.

It is therefore in the interests of most Syrians, and particularly of the revolution, for some kind of ceasefire to allow a breathing space for the mass civil movement to revive. Pouring in the kinds of advanced weapons that would allow the rebels to take Damascus and Aleppo whole, despite popular reluctance, would be no democratic solution (and still less would a “Libyan solution” of achieving this via imperialist bombing). However, it is important to remember that no-one, least of all the imperialist powers, is proposing anything like this.

It is somewhat ironic that the receipt of limited numbers of small arms by the rebels is put forward as a cause of prolonging the war, rather than the massive use of heavy weaponry by the regime. The logical conclusion of this argument is that they should allow themselves to be crushed and achieve the “peace of the grave.” Even if the rebels got the main weapons they demand, but which the US blocks—portable anti-aircraft guns—this would only allow the rebels to defend themselves and their mass base more effectively; these are not offensive weapons that would allow them to march on Damascus.

What such weapons might allow, however, is for supporters of the revolution to gain more confidence, win back supporters pessimistic about confronting the regime, and actually put pressure on the regime to come to some kind of ceasefire; it is the regime’s overwhelming military superiority that allows it to push its military solution.

Given the enormous military superiority the regime already holds, it is difficult to see how even more Russian and Iranian arms to the regime would make that much difference, and the lack of western arms has not held them back in any case.

Socialists have no business demanding our imperialist governments send arms or do anything in particular, as we know their agendas; but neither should we protest if they do send some arms (as opposed to more direct intervention which we must strongly resist). In fact, by demanding a complete US exit from the region, the CIA operatives currently preventing better arms from getting to the rebels would be out of a job.

It should be stressed, however, that a change in imperialist strategy is not out of the question, if western leaders decide the situation continuing as at present is simply too destabilizing. While unlikely, if the US and other imperialist powers decide to desperately throw themselves in with an array of no-fly zones, aerial bombings and so on, the current situation would become even more catastrophic, both inside Syria and regionally. While it is clearly not the Israeli strategy—Israel has continually made it clear it sees Assad, who has kept the peace on the occupied Golan border for 40 years and continually made war on the Palestinians, as the lesser evil to any of the Syrian rebel forces—Israel would likely move to take advantage of such a conflagration to carry out its own aggression against Iran, or even to forcibly expel a new wave of Palestinians.

Opposing imperialism should not mean being apologists for Assad’s butchery. But it is important to remember that opposing this butchery should in no circumstances mean losing our critical faculties and forgetting the kind of Armageddon a real imperialist war would entail.

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P.S.

* <http://cpdweb.org/news/Syria-Karadjis.shtml>

Footnotes

[1] a good description of this process can be read here:

<http://harpers.org/archive/2012/08/welcome-to-free-syria/>

[2] See on ESSF (article 27201), [Welcome to Free Syria](#).

[3] <http://world.time.com/2012/07/24/a-dispatch-from-free-syria-how-to-run-a-liberated-town/>

[4] <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2013/03/syria-witness-running-the-town-of-qusayr-without-assad-81450/#ixzz2NdfWSbWK>

[5] See on ESSF (article 27423), [Syria: Free Duma - popular councils and democracy from below](#).

[6] See on ESSF (article 29372), "[Syria or elsewhere, there are no pure revolutions, just revolutions...](#)" for this point

[7] <http://www.etalaf.org/en/newsroom/press-release/item/488-the-syrian-coalition-on-possible-child-execution-in-aleppo.html>

[8] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23190533>

[9] See on ESSF (article 28683), [Statement on inhumane act](#).

[10] See on ESSF (article 28381), [Syria: New Battalions Sign the Code of Conduct](#).

[11] see for examples of popular demonstrations, slogans, declarations etc against these currents and their actions at [Syria Freedom Forever](#), <http://darthnader.net/2012/10/13/and-then-there-was-hope/>, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/04/201241314026709762.html>, and elsewhere.

[12] See on ESSF (article 29595), [Syria: FSA "at war" with Al-Qaeda militants following assassination](#).

[13] <http://syriawitness.middleeastvoices.com/>

[14] <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/americas-hidden-agenda-in-syrias-war>

[15] See here:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443684104578062842929673074.html> and here: <http://eaworldview.com/2013/06/syria-special-the-us-saudi-conflict-over-arms-to-insurgents/>

The reason for this is that the US is not only concerned with radical Islamists; it is also aware that the exile FSA leaders that it has relations with have almost no control over the revolutionary forces inside Syria.

Thus while the left worries that western arms will allow imperialism to hijack the movement, the US has refused to arm the rebels for over two years because it believes it cannot successfully hijack it. Ironically, while Syrian revolutionaries are continually confronting the reactionary

Islamists, as shown above, when the US tried to prematurely push them against these forces, the same Syrians came out into the streets to denounce US interference

[[<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Dec-14/198527-syrian-protesters-slam-us-blacklisting-of-jihadist-group.ashx#axzz2F62w5Yns>]