

Syria: A review of the origins and development of the revolutionary process (part 2)

Monday 27 October 2014, by [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2014).

This follows part 1 of the article [Syria: A review of the origins and development of the revolutionary process \(part 1\)](#), ESSF (article 33126).

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The Syrian uprising is explained by internal factors, by the absence of democracy and growing social inequality, as well as by regional factors, in the framework of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

The regional dynamics of the uprising

The Syrian revolutionary process is part of a regional movement which has shaken the entire Arab region. It is therefore clearly in the context of other uprisings which are the result of the confluence and mutual reinforcement of different sites of dissatisfaction, struggle and popular mobilization. These battles are intertwined and have enabled different sectors of these societies to join forces in rebelling against authoritarian and corrupt regimes, deemed moreover responsible for the continuous deepening of the social crisis.

The turn taken by the dynamic of protest in a large number of countries of the region, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Morocco, and so on, should be related to previous mobilizations, as has been clearly explained by Mounia Bennani Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule: the joint actions of support for causes deemed “Arab” or “Islamic” like the Palestinian issue; workers’ mobilizations in the Tunisian mines of the Gafsa basin (2008) or Ben Guerdane (2010), or the wave

of workers' strikes that has continued to grow in Egypt since 2004 ; the coordination against the high cost of living in Morocco (up to 2009); the development of groups which transcend ideological cleavages (like Kifaya, the April 6 group, and the National Association for Change in Egypt, or human rights organizations in several countries) .

These mobilisations have allowed partial convergence between activists belonging to socio-political networks that we would not characterise as competitors, but as different: they have known how to combine their claims and their forces at certain times, such as the workers' movements of Egypt and Tunisia, and political activists more generally. In addition, borders have sometimes proved porous between trade union structures and political activists, the latter reaching out to act within the UGTT in Tunisia or the independent trade unions in Egypt. Such experiences promote the learning of collective protest by millions of people and past actions always serve as experience for future initiatives.

In our view, several demands explain the popular mobilizations that have convulsed the region. First of all, the demand for basic democratic rights in the face of dictatorial regimes, supported directly or indirectly (at least, initially) by the Western countries (many political, economic and security agreements witness to such a collaboration).

The depth of the social question and its impact on the outbreak of these revolutions is surely the dimension that has been most obscured by the mass media and the available literature on these events and their dynamic. These popular uprisings, which occurred after decades of structural adjustment policies and neoliberal measures, express of course a revolt against the latter, particularly as they were imposed by corrupt authoritarian regimes supported by financial institutions which are increasingly perceived as the licensed representatives of the Western powers and foreign capital, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB).

The scourges that derive from these policies are many. Among them are high unemployment or under-employment, particularly among young graduates who do not find jobs on a job market that focuses on activities with low added value and skilled work is rare; the deepening of social and economic inequalities, the fact that the lower and middle classes have not enjoyed the fruits of "growth"; the privatization process that has led to the formation of new monopolies in the hands of those close to the regime.

These phenomena are in fact an integral part of a system of corruption that directly benefits the ruling circles of these countries, including the family of Mubarak in Egypt, Trabelsi (wife of President Ben Ali) in Tunisia, or Makhoul (first cousin of Bashar al-Assad) in Syria. The popular movements have also been accompanied by a recurring denunciation of the nepotism of these families. Thus, from the beginning of the process, the protesters in Syria have designated Rami Makhoul as a "thief", a veritable incarnation of the corruption and undue opulence of the country, and have attacked the branches of his telecommunications company (Syriatel), as well as other firms belonging to him.

The social forces of these uprisings will therefore bring together different groups in society stretching from the popular classes who wish to change their material conditions and want more democracy, to a part of the bourgeoisie who can perceive its interest in the promotion of a liberal state, free of the tutelage of the reigning families who have seized political power and the growing economic benefits arising from this. This phenomenon should be further analysed to better understand the dynamics of different groups of the Syrian opposition.

The internal dynamics of the uprising

At the internal level, the weeks preceding the beginning of the first demonstrations, in mid-March 2011, saw the situation develop slowly: demonstrations in support of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were prohibited, and those held were strongly suppressed by the security forces. On 14 February 2011, 14 people were arrested and several people beaten by police officers in uniform and in civilian clothes during a peaceful sit-in involving 200 people in front of the Libyan embassy, in solidarity with the uprising there.

During this same period, many human rights activists had to face a series of tactics of intimidation, including visits to their homes by agents of the intelligence services and the close monitoring of their emails, blogs and so on, as well as of their telephone conversations. Some of them were warned not to leave the country.

On 16 March members of the families and relatives of a number of political prisoners organized a rally in front of the Ministry of the Interior to obtain their release. Thirty-four of them were arrested, 32 of whom were placed under investigation for “undermining the prestige of the state”. It was in the same week that the true spark of the beginning of the uprising was triggered, in the southern city of Deraa, which quickly became a symbol of the national resistance: the arrest of 15 children for having written “the people want the fall of the regime” (“Ash-shab yurid iskat year nizam”) on the walls of their school, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and the insults directed to their parents who were asking for their release, on the part of the head of the security services in the region. Subsequently, the discovery of traces of torture on the bodies of these children after their release from prison reinforced the sense of humiliation of the local populations. The story of these events was spreading rapidly across the country. The 18 March 2011 was the first day of the Syrian uprising, called the “Friday of dignity” in response to the lack of respect of the local authorities, in tandem with the Friday of the same name in Yemen. The events in Deraa probably marked a turning point of the situation in Syria, like the “Friday of rage” of 28 January in Egypt.

The Syrian uprising would then extend gradually during the month to all regions of the country - despite the repression deployed by the regime, which made massive use of force by opening fire on the demonstrators. Indeed, it was this violent and growing repression by the security services that would progressively radicalize the popular movement, which passed from the demand for reforms to demanding the fall of the regime.

The uprising in the city of Deraa, regarded as a bastion of the Ba’ath, from where a number of senior dignitaries of the Baath originated, like vice-chair Farouk el Shareh, embodied the bankruptcy of a state and its elites, who had for years abandoned to their own fate the rural classes and the outlying cities which they came from, to the benefit of policies promoting the bourgeois classes of Damascus and Aleppo. This tension between the centre and the peripheries of the country fully justifies a “materialistic” approach specifying the “internal” causes of the Syrian revolution.

The actors in the popular movement

Now I should explain the reasons that lead me to define the mobilization of the Syrian people and its major public events as a “popular movement”. The actors in this movement came from several components. In the first place, there were activists involved in the struggles against the regime before the uprising of 2011, in particular since the “Damascus Spring” (2001), coming from middle class layers, often young graduates and users of social networks. Their activities were aimed mainly at respect for democratic rights in Syria; some of them had already mobilized against the war in Iraq

and for the Palestinian cause. They were in their great majority secular democrats belonging to all communities, including minorities such as the Alawites, Christians, Druze and so on.

Examples also include various activist groups from different regions of the country, like the Youth of Daraya, on the outskirts of Damascus, who were socially active for almost ten years, launching a campaign against corruption or organizing a demonstration after the fall of Baghdad, in April 2003, in the course of which they were arrested under the pretext of “forming an unregistered political group and spreading confessionalism”. The Youth of Daraya drew on historical examples of non-violent movements. They formed a mobile library and distributed books to the people of their neighbourhood. They cleaned the streets. They showed films on Gandhi in a mosque.

All these activists were present from the beginning of the uprising, on 16 March 2011. They have up until now played up an important role within the grassroots committees and in the development of peaceful actions against the regime. The General Commission of the Syrian Revolution, a coalition of local committees, was headed notably by Suhair Atassi, a long-term opposition activist from a prestigious political family and moderator of the Forum Jamal Attassi, prohibited by the regime in 2000. She was held for ten days following the demonstration of 16 March 2011, of which she was accused of being one of the organizers. She now lives in exile, after having spent months in hiding. The Coordination of Local Committees (CLC), another important body, is led by the lawyer and activist Razan Zaitoune.

The regime specifically targeted these activists, who had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience actions and campaigns in favour of strikes, because of their qualities as organizers and a democratic and secular position which undermined the propaganda of the regime that denounced a conspiracy of armed extremist Islamist groups. Some of them were imprisoned, killed or forced into exile, even if they are nevertheless still present in spite of fierce repression. They play an important role in the ongoing revolutionary process by trying to articulate between the various forms of popular resistance to the regime.

The second and undoubtedly the most important component of the Syrian revolutionary movement is that of economically marginalized rural workers, and urban employees and self-employed workers, who have borne the brunt of the implementation of neoliberal policies, in particular since the coming to power of President Bashar al-Assad. The geography of the revolts in Idleb and Deraa, as well as in other rural areas, all historical strongholds of the Baath party which had not played a large role in the insurgency of the early 1980s, including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, shows the involvement of the victims of neo-liberalism in this revolution. From this component of the current protests emerged some of those who joined the armed groups of the FSA (Free Syrian Army), first developed to defend peaceful demonstrations and since then adopting more offensive policies.

Similarly, we can see groups of protesters who opposed the regime around sheikhs in certain neighbourhoods. That is why many of them were arrested, while others have had to flee the country. Finally, elements of the more “traditional” opposition are also involved in the popular movement, among them some Kurdish parties, left-wing groups, nationalists, liberals and Islamists.

Armed resistance and self-organization

Several elements fostered the emergence of armed groups after more than seven months of demonstrations and peaceful resistance.

In the first place, the violent repression of the regime against peaceful demonstrators and against the leaders of the popular movement, killed, arrested or forced into exile. This radicalized the

movement and helped to push forward activists more inclined to resist with weapons. More and more groups of citizens took up arms to defend their demonstrations and their homes against the *chabihās* [militiamen paid by the regime, perpetrators of countless abuses], the security services and the army.

In the second place, the increasing number of desertions from the army, in particular of ranking soldiers refusing to fire on peaceful demonstrators. The reluctance of soldiers to fire on peaceful protests provoked many mutinies and desertions. It is also necessary to mention the willingness of the regime to militarize the revolution by leaving weapons on the fields of battle or by increasing the number of weapons on the market and/or lowering the price of weapons to justify the discourse of the regime that they were fighting against armed extremist groups.

Finally, there was the willingness of political currents and/or states, notably private donors in the Gulf monarchies, to fund specific armed groups to strengthen the support they had or establish relays on the ground.

In April 2013, the FSA addressed a statement to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Syria. It denounced its attempts to monopolize the revolution and held it responsible for the delaying of victory and the fragmentation of the opposition, since it sought to subordinate groups on the ground in exchange for material and financial support. [1]

The release of significant groups of jihadists and Islamists by the Assad regime during the first amnesties in May-June 2011, which would normally allow the liberation of demonstrators and political prisoners, also strengthened the process of militarization of the Syrian revolution. Most of the Islamists and jihadists released at this period are at the head of the main armed groups active today.

The members of the groups of the armed opposition of the FSA originated socially from the majority component of the revolutionary movement: mainly marginalized workers of the cities and the countryside, members of the subaltern and middle classes who have suffered from the acceleration of neo-liberal economic policies since the arrival in power of Bashar al-Assad. In the groups of the armed opposition, there are also soldiers who have deserted to be found as well of the military who have defected, and civilians who have decided to take up arms, the latter being much in the majority.

The Syrian army was structured at the time of Hafez el-Assad, which explains why collective insubordination or mutiny is very difficult. The structure of the high command is based on clientelism and confessionism. Most of the units loyal to Assad are dominated by Alawite officers, even if they also include Sunni officers. The leader of the battalion which led the terrible attack on the Baba Amr neighbourhood of Homs, in February 2012, was thus a Sunni colonel. The role assigned to these units is to protect the regime by applying various forms of repression. Mostly, those who want to defect can only act individually or in small groups, leaving the ranks with or without their weapons.

These difficulties did not, however, prevent the development of desertions. The regime has thus been compelled to secure its units by the integration of new elements from the security apparatus. Thousands of soldiers and officers have been imprisoned as suspected of sympathy with the revolution. According to some testimonies, up to half of the losses suffered by the Syrian army have resulted from murders perpetrated by soldiers loyal to the regime. The regime subsequently set up armed civilian groups, called popular defence committees, to assist it in its suppression, while also receiving massive military and economic assistance from Iran and Russia, while armed Shiite groups, including Hezbollah and Iraqi groups, have continued to increase their number of

combatants in Syria. Hezbollah has participated in many military operations with the Syrian army, sometimes even playing a leadership role at the military level.

In many regions of the country, revolutionary councils were formed, as well as coordinating committees of political and armed actions. A code of good conduct respecting international law and rejecting confessionism has been signed by a large part of the armed groups that are part of the popular resistance. These measures were taken in response to acts of torture and murders committed by the armed opposition groups, often without links with the FSA, which have been condemned by the popular movement and the vast majority of the battalions of the FSA.

The FSA is still not a unified institution. It is rather the collective designation of independent armed groups, localized in various regions of the country. These groups do not have adequate arms or funding. They buy weapons on the local black market - from traffickers who profit from the situation - but also from Iraqi, Lebanese and Turkish smugglers. The members of the FSA also retrieve weapons abandoned by the security forces or left in their depots.

In 2012, the Coordination of Local Committees (CLC) analyzed the situation of the FSA in the following terms: "The fate of our Revolution has been entrusted to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of deserters and civilians who bear arms to defend themselves. This group is devoid of any sustainable basis and does not have a unified command. At the same time, the FSA has remarkably and courageously defended unarmed civilians and their living areas with light weapons and little ammunition. As could be expected, the war machine of the repressive regime has been able to concentrate its repression and anger on the residents of these areas where the FSA has taken a position. The war machine of the regime has carried out acts of reprisal that have doubled the number of victims, resulting in humanitarian crises and causing the appearance of disaster zones in many regions of the country". [\[2\]](#)

In addition, the lack of organized and broad support for the FSA has led to a lack of effective leadership of the armed opposition, while the Islamist groups unrelated to the FSA and financed by the Gulf countries have continued to expand. The opposition consists currently of more than 1000 armed groups with multiple and varied alliances according to regions and contextual dynamic. The FSA has nevertheless been the target of the jihadists, particularly the Islamic State in the Levant and Iraq (ISIS) now renamed Islamic State (IS) but also Jabhat al Nusra (the official branch of Al Qaeda today in Syria) and some Islamist groups who have murdered some of its officers and attacked some of its brigades.

The Islamic Front has distanced itself from the opposition in exile of the national coalition, following the refusal of the latter to grant it a greater presence within the military leadership commanded by brigadier general Salim Idriss. The Islamic Front declared that it would not oppose the FSA, despite the attack on some of these groups, and has called for an Islamic state in Syria. This new Islamic Front has the financial and political support of monarchical regimes of the Gulf. The massive funding of these groups helped to attract many opposition fighters, not by a religious discourse, but mainly by military equipment which was much more sophisticated and abundant, and higher wages compared to the brigades of the FSA which lack everything.

The Gulf monarchies and the private donors in these countries have funded the reactionary Islamist forces in order to transform the Syrian revolution into a sectarian war. The victory of the revolution in Syria and its spread in the region would constitute a threat to their own regimes.

The popular movement and self-organization

From the beginning of the revolution, the main forms of organization have been the people's committees at the level of villages, neighbourhoods, cities and regions. These popular committees were the real spearhead of the movement, mobilizing the people for the demonstrations. Subsequently, in the areas liberated from the yoke of the regime they have developed forms of self-organization based on the organization of the masses. Popular elected councils have emerged to manage these liberated regions, proving that it is the regime that caused the anarchy, and not the people.

In some regions liberated from the armed forces of the regime, civil administrations have also been put in place to compensate for the absence of the state and to fulfil its role in many areas, such as schools, hospitals, roads, and water, electricity and communications services. These civilian administrations are appointed through elections by popular consensus and have for their main tasks the provision of services like administration and law and order.

Free local elections in "liberated" areas have been held for the first time in 40 years in some regions, neighbourhoods and villages. This is the case for example in the city of Deir Ezzor, in February 2013, where a voter called Ahmad Mohammad said: "we want a democratic state, not an Islamic state, we want a secular state managed by civilians and not by the mullahs". These local councils reflect the sense of responsibility and the capacity of citizens to take initiatives to manage their affairs by relying on their frameworks, experiences and energies. They exist in various forms, both in the liberated areas and those still under the domination of the regime.

Another concrete example of this dynamic of self-organization is the founding meeting of the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth in Syria, which took place in June 2013 in Aleppo. The meeting brought together a wide range of activists and coordinating committees, which have played an important role on the ground since the outbreak of the revolution in Syria and who came from different regions of the country and represented broad sectors of Syrian society. The conference has been presented as a key step to representing the revolutionary youth of all communities. We should also note the formation of the Free Syrian Union, on 13 October 2013 following a meeting at Rihania, a town on the border between Syria and Turkey. This structure is composed of around 106 groups and collectives bringing together the military brigades, information groups and other civilian formations. Its founding statement calls in particular for a free and democratic Syria in which all religious communities and ethnic groups would be treated equally. This does not preclude that there are sometimes limits to these popular councils, such as the lack of representation of women, or of certain minorities. It is not to embellish reality but to establish the truth.

Another important element in the popular dynamic of the revolution is the explosion of independent newspapers produced by popular organizations. The number of newspapers has tripled since the revolution started - with a press essentially in the hands of the regime - to more than sixty, written by popular groups.

The example of Raqqa

A very striking example of the self-organization of the masses is the city of Raqqa, the only provincial capital liberated from the forces of the regime (since March 2013). Still subject to bombardment, Raqqa is completely independent and it is the local population that manages all the services in the community.

In Raqqa, popular organizations are most often led by young people. They have multiplied, to the point that more than 42 social movements were officially registered at the end of May. The popular committees have organized various campaigns. An example is the campaign “the Syrian revolutionary flag represents me”, painting the revolutionary flag in the neighbourhoods and the streets of the city, to oppose the campaign of the Islamists who wanted to impose the Islamic black flag. At the cultural level, a piece of theatre satirizing the Assad regime was shown in the city centre and at the beginning of June the popular organizations organized an exhibition of local arts and crafts. Centres have been established to deal with young people and the psychological disturbances caused by the consequences of the war. The end-of-year exams for the Syrian baccalaureate in July and July were organized by volunteers.

This kind of experience of self-organization is reflected in many liberated regions. It is to be noted that women play a large role in these movements and in the demonstrations in general. For example on June 18, 2013 in Raqqa, a mass demonstration, conducted by women, took place in front of the headquarters of Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist group, in which the protesters called for the release of prisoners who had been incarcerated. The demonstrators chanted slogans against Jabhat al-Nusra, and denounced their actions. The demonstrators chanted the slogan first used in Damascus in February 2011: “The Syrian people refuse to be humiliated”. The group “Haquna” (which means “our right”), in which many women are present, has also organized many rallies against the Islamist groups in Raqqa, chanting “Raqqa is free, Jabhat al-Nusra out”.

Many new demonstrations have also taken place in this city against Islamic State.

In the town of Deiz Zor in June, a campaign was launched by local activists aimed at encourage citizens to participate in the processes of monitoring and documentation of the practices of the local people’s councils, including by associating them to assert their rights and to promote the culture of human rights in society. A particular emphasis has been placed on the idea of law and justice for all during this campaign.

Against the Islamists and jihadists

While in Europe and the United States the need to oppose the jihadists is only just being talked about, the Syrian revolutionary people has opposed them for more than a year. These are the same popular organizations cited above, which are the most often opposed to the armed Islamic groups. They want to take control of liberated areas by force when they have no roots in the popular movement, and they are nothing to do with the revolution.

The city of Raqqa has for example seen a continued and unwavering resistance against Islamist groups. Since the city was liberated from the troops of the regime, in March 2013, many demonstrations have been organized against the ideology and authoritarian practices of the Islamist groups. There have been rallies in solidarity with activists demanding their release from the jails of the Islamists. This has led to the release of some activists, but many others remain imprisoned until today like the famous Father Paolo and others, such as the son of the intellectual Yassin Hajj Saleh, Firas.

In September 2013, following the occupation of the city by ISIS and the attack by the latter against the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation in Raqqa, groups of young activists organized a demonstration to condemn the actions of ISIS, in which they brandished a large cross as a sign of solidarity with the Syrian Christian community in the city. They have also published the statement: “We demand the respect of all religions: Christians and Muslims are one and united, we have lived and we will live as brothers. The people engaged in these kinds of actions represent only themselves

and the Islamic religion is innocent of such acts.”

Women have played a leading role in the resistance of the population to ISIS in the town of Raqqa, as elsewhere. For example, Suad Nofal, a school teacher, has protested almost daily for several months against the authoritarian practices of ISIS and for the release of political prisoners. Similar demonstrations of the popular masses challenging authoritarian practices and reactionary Islamists have taken place in Aleppo, Mayādīn, Al-Quseir and other cities such as Kafranbel. These struggles continue today.

The CLC have also denounced the calls of the Al Qaeda leader, Ayman Zawihiri, for the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria. They condemned this “flagrant interference in the internal affairs of Syria” and reiterated “the fact that only Syrians will decide the future of their country”. In this statement, the CLC affirmed once again that “the Syrian revolution began in order to achieve freedom, justice, and a civil status, pluralistic and democratic ... the establishment in Syria of a State for all its citizens”. [3]

In the district of Bustan Qasr, in Aleppo, the local population has demonstrated many times to denounce the actions of the Sharia Council of Aleppo, which is composed of several Islamist groups. On August 23, 2013 for example, the demonstrators in Bustan Qasr, while condemning the massacre by chemical weapons committed by the regime against the population of the eastern Ghouta, also demanded the release of the well known activist Abu Maryam, once more imprisoned by the Shania Council of Aleppo. A popular explosion also took place following the killing by foreign jihadists belonging to ISIS of a young boy aged 14, for so-called blasphemy when he had made a joke referring to the Prophet Mohammed. A demonstration was organized by the people’s committee of Bustan Qasr against the Islamic Council and the Islamist groups, chanting: “What a shame, what a shame, the revolutionaries have become Shabbiha” [a reference to an armed pro Assad group], or they made reference to the Islamic Council citing the security services of the Assad regime, a clear allusion to its authoritarian practices.

On August 2, 2013, during one of the weekly Friday demonstrations, the CLC, which plays an important role providing information on the revolution but also in aiding and supplying services for people and refugees, stated this in their press release: “in a unified message of the revolution to the whole world, we can confirm that the kidnappings of activists and of key actors in the revolution, in addition to serving the interests of the tyranny, are detrimental to the freedom and dignity of the revolution”. This message was addressed directly to those reactionary Islamist groups. In the same spirit, on July 28, 2013, the CLC wrote a press release with the title: “Tyranny is one, whether exercised in the name of religion or in the name of secularism”, comparing the Islamists and the regime. The CLC published a press release on September 20, 2013 whose title was “Only the Syrians will liberate Syria”, re-affirming their rejection of a replacement of one tyranny by another, and they complained about the practices of ISIS, who “do not differ from the practices of the Syrian regime in the repression and the suppression of freedom of expression”.

The People’s Council of the district of Salah El-Din, in the city of Aleppo, waved a sign in the middle of a demonstration on September 27, 2013, in opposition to ISIS, which said: “Take your Islam and leave us our Islam - Islam conquered hearts before territories”. Coordinating committees such as the Kurdish Committee for Fraternity have accused ISIS of “occupying the cities and terrorizing the citizens”, equating it to the armed pro-regime groups, such as Hezbollah, who also target civilians. On a demonstration against ISIS in the neighbourhood of Ashrafiya in Aleppo on 20 September 2013, placards were waved saying “Syria will be free, ISIS out” and “Our Syria is coloured. No to ISIS and its black flag.”

In September of the same year, eleven civilian organizations representing the organized

revolutionary structure in the region of the Ghouta, an area outside Damascus, strongly defended the activist Razan Zaitouneh, a popular revolutionary figure, against threats made to her by members of armed Islamist factions.

In mid-October, the Civil Movement in Syria released a statement following the remarks of Zahran Alloush, commander of the Army of Islam, in which the groups and the members of the Syrian revolutionary process declared their rejection “of any attempt by any party to impose new forms of authoritarianism on the Syrian population and the work of the activists”.

This statement was published after Alloush sought to impose his authority on the civilian council of the city of Duma, on the outskirts of Damascus. The armed and peaceful popular opposition has not ceased to oppose ISIS, now IS, up to today.

Arabs and Kurds united

In the north-east of Syria, inhabited in its majority by the Kurdish population, the recent fighting between Islamists and Kurdish militias of the PYD (linked to the PKK) has been the occasion for popular initiatives by activists and the local population. These popular initiatives were aimed at demonstrating the brotherhood of Kurds and Arabs in this region and to reaffirm that the popular revolution excluded racism and bigotry. At the time of the fighting, in the province of Raqqqa, the city of Tall Abyad saw the formation of the battalion “Chirko Ayoubi”, which joined the brigade of the Kurdish front on 22 July 2013. The battalion is now composed of Arabs and Kurds together. They have issued a joint statement denouncing the abuses committed by the Islamist groups and the attempts at division of the Syrian people based on ethnicity and community. The different factions of the FSA are however divided. Some fight on the side of the Islamists, but others have joined the Kurdish militias and denounced the atrocities committed by Islamist groups.

In the city of Aleppo, more specifically in the neighbourhood of Achrafieh (inhabited mainly by Kurds), a demonstration was organized on 1 August 2013 bringing together several hundred people in favour of solidarity between Arabs and Kurds, to condemn acts committed by Islamic extremist groups against the Kurdish population.

In the city of Tell Abyad, which has been subject to intense fighting, activists have tried to launch several initiatives to put an end to the military conflict between the two groups, to stop the forced departure of civilians, to set up a popular committee to govern and manage the city on a daily basis, and to promote initiatives and joint actions between Arabs and Kurds, in order to reach a consensus by peaceful means. The efforts are continuing today despite the continuation of fighting between Islamists and Kurdish militias.

In the town of Amouda, about thirty activists met on 5 August 2013 with Kurdish flags and flags from revolutionary Syrians behind a sign saying “I love you Homs”, to show their solidarity with the city besieged by the regime’s army.

Most recently, in the city of Qamichli, where Arabs (Muslim and Christian), Kurds and Assyrians live, local activists have launched numerous projects to ensure coexistence and the management of certain neighbourhoods by joint committees. In this same city, the branch of the Union of Free Kurdish Students has launched an internet campaign for freedom, peace and fraternity, tolerance and equality for the future of Syria.

At the time of the attacks on the Kurdish majority city of Kobani by the forces of the Islamic State, military resistance was organized by the PYD and its military forces, the People’s Protection Units

(YPG), and also of the active participation of at least three battalions of Arab combatants present in the city: “revolutionary battalion of Al Raqqa”, “Sun of the North battalion” and the “Jirablis” battalion. On 4 October, the free Syrian Army also decided to send a thousand fighters to defend Kobani. Many demonstrations of support for the town of Kobani also took place in villages and “free” districts of Syria by the revolutionaries.

In its very large majority, the Syrian popular movement has repeatedly expressed its rejection of confessionalism, despite the attempts by the regime and Islamist groups to light this dangerous fire. The slogans of the demonstrators such as “We are all Syrians, we are united” and “No to confessionalism” have been repeated continuously until today.

It is important to understand the crucial role played by the people’s committees and organizations in the pursuit of the revolutionary process, because these are the essential actors that allow the popular movement to resist. This is not to diminish the role played by the armed resistance, but the latter depends on the popular movement to continue the struggle. Without it, we would have no chance.

It is difficult to establish a relationship of forces between the different popular committees, which have a very significant implantation in this revolution, and the jihadist and Islamist reactionary groups. What is certain is that the popular movement will not abandon the goals of the revolution: democracy, social justice and rejection of confessionalism, despite the threats that the Islamist groups and the Assad regime represent.

In 2014, a persistent popular movement and struggle against the regime and ISIS

The popular movement continues to make its voice heard against all those who are opposed to the goals of the revolution.

In January 2014, a popular explosion in many liberated areas had pushed ISIS out and encouraged other armed groups to combat the latter, including certain Islamist groups which were initially reluctant but which, under popular pressure, had to fight ISIS. For a large majority of the people of the liberated territories ISIS had become the other face of the Assad regime because of his authoritarianism, well summarised by the chanting of the demonstrators that “Assad and ISIS are one”.

In March 2014, numerous events and activities were held to commemorate the third anniversary of the Syrian revolution and recall its objectives, with photo exhibitions and theatrical performances in liberated zones like Aleppo and the region of Idlib.

During April and May, actions were also organized against the jihadist and Islamist groups. In the town of Minbej, near Aleppo, held by ISIS, a general strike was called in May by the inhabitants of the city to protest against the occupation. A group of activists have also launched a campaign to call for the release of four revolutionaries including Razan Zeitouneh, the symbol of the popular uprising and the struggle against the regime, kidnapped in December 2013, very probably by the Islamic Front who had already threatened activists in the past. Demonstrations have been held for example in the city of Duma, close to Damascus, and in the district of Salah el-Din in Aleppo under the slogan: “Whoever kidnapped the revolutionaries is a traitor”.

During the sham democratic election in June 2014, which saw the re-election of the dictator Bashar al-Assad, groups of activists distributed flyers and brochures in the greatest secrecy, before and

during the elections, in cities and areas under the domination of the regime, such as Damascus, Aleppo and Hama, condemning the crimes of the latter and reiterating their determination to continue their revolution until victory. At the same time there were demonstrations in many liberated areas to denounce these "elections of blood". We also saw some revolutionaries in the liberated areas transform garbage cans into ballot boxes on which was written "You can vote here", "We have thrown you out, Bashar" and "Bashar, it is here that you live". In the town of Qamichli, a demonstration was organized by movements of young Kurds to condemn the election as a farce orchestrated by Assad and calling for a boycott.

During the Israeli military aggression against the Gaza Strip, in the "liberated territories" of Syria, particularly in different neighbourhoods of Aleppo, in the city of Qaboun near Damascus, Deraa, and so on, there were demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinian people from the start of the operation.

In the district of Salah el Din, the protesters sent this message to the Palestinian people: "from the population of Salah el Din in Aleppo to the population of Gaza: we are one, as is our fight against our enemy". A torchlight vigil also took place in Aleppo for Gaza, while children were demonstrating en masse in the city of Qaboun in solidarity with Palestine. There have also been demonstrations in support of Gaza in the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk. On the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel, protesters supporting the Syrian revolution denounced the military attack of the army of occupation of Israel on Gaza, with signs calling for a halt to the massacre in Syria and Gaza.

At the beginning of August 2014, activists in the popular committees and popular councils of some neighbourhoods of Aleppo launched a campaign to revitalize the movement of peaceful protest against the regime while also opposing the Islamic State and the dangers posed by the latter while it was at the gates of Aleppo. The campaign wants to particularly revive street demonstrations while using social media. The campaign is called: "peaceful activism is the pulse of the revolution".

The campaign brings together the revolutionary councils of the neighbourhoods of Salah al-Din, Bustan al-Qasr, Kalasa and the old city of Aleppo, the Coordinating Committee of the district of Mashhad, and civil defence emergency teams. The municipal council of free Aleppo, the Syrian Association of Women and a number of independent activists have also joined this mobilization.

During the first day of the campaign, the revolutionary council of Salah al-Din organized a vigil. Participants held banners in response to an article published in the American magazine "Live Wire", characterising Aleppo as "the most dangerous city in the world". The demonstrators wanted to send a message that their city is alive and deserves their affection despite the dangers of living there. In the east of Aleppo, the protesters took part in a march from the neighbourhood of Salah al-Din, passing by Mashhad and ending in the neighbourhood of Ansari. The students participating in the demonstration waved signs calling for a return to the values defended at the beginning of the revolution of 2011, and for the unification of the Free Syrian Army.

The most notable facts are two strikes in the free areas of Aleppo. First, that of the street sweepers on 20 September against the "provisional government", body of the national opposition coalition, and then that of the of "civil defence" agents, equivalent of firefighters, against the same "government" on 21 September. There was also the creation on 3 October of an independent campaign of denunciation and the continuation of corruption within the structures of the opposition...

During September there were also many demonstrations and mobilizations against the intervention of the coalition led by the United States, on 26 September for example under the slogan "The civilians do not need the new international assassins!", thus expressing their feeling of the

uselessness of bombardments and especially their opposition. A streamer held up by a demonstrator of Alep said it recently: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. (Albert Einstein), and underneath: Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003, Syria 2014".

On 16 October the demonstrators of the "liberated" city of Kafranbel demonstrated under the slogan of returning to the spirit of the revolution.

In the regions under the control of the regime, the opposition has not stopped rising even among the "loyal supporters".

In July and August, the areas under control of the regime were submerged by an avalanche of leaflets printed with the slogan "We want to live: your children lie with the palace and our children in coffins". In the same way mid-August, a campaign was launched by activists from the Alawite community, "Shout" your opposition to Assad. The group tries to show the dangers and the sacrifices made by the Alawite community to defend the Assad regime. They for example launched campaigns on the social networks or on several occasions secretly distributed leaflets in the town of Tartous stating "the street wants to live" and "the chair for you [Assad], coffins for our children", in reference to the significant number of Alawite soldiers in the regime's army of the mode who have died during the last three years. The chair is a symbolic reference to the presidency.

On 2 October, an important demonstration in the "loyal" districts of the city of Homs took place against the governmental leaders, following an explosion which killed tens of children. The demonstrators shouted the slogan "the people wants the fall of Barazi", in reference to the governor of the city, Talal Barazi, a regime supporter.

On the same day there was a demonstration in the "rebellious" district of Homs in solidarity with the families of the victims. This occurred one month after the arrest of "loyal" activists at the origin of a protest campaign called "Where are they? ", against the abandonment by the regime of a military base in the north of Raqqa province and the massacre of hundreds of soldiers by the Islamic State.

In the middle of October the town of Tartus, regarded as a stronghold of the regime saw its first demonstration calling for the fall of the regime and all its symbols.

At the same moment, the opening of a major shopping centre, including seven restaurants and a game room for children, costing more than 50 million dollars in the town of Tartus exasperated partisans of Bachar el-Assad, who consider them indecent while the country is devastated by the war. These criticisms express an increasingly palpable bitterness in the pro-regime media, in particular after considerable losses among the soldiers, and the drama caused by the death of about fifty children in recent attacks on Homs. The promotion of other tourist projects simply adds to it. Loyal supporters accuse the regime of abandoning "while approximately 60% of the population of Tartus cannot afford to shop there" over there ", says one indignant message on a pro-regime Facebook page.

At the same time we should note the formation, in several regions with a Kurdish majority, in the north-east of Syria, of an autonomous government dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian equivalent of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), in November 2013. The forces of Assad had withdrawn in July 2012, from nine cities with a Kurdish majority. The PYD controls most of the Kurdish regions outside the city of Qamishli, still under occupation of the regime, and a few mixed cities in the provinces of Hasaka and in Aleppo.

Autonomous transitional administrations have been created in the three areas of Afrine, north-west of Aleppo, Kobani, between the Turkish border to the north and the Euphrates which borders on the

west, and the Djezireh, the largest and most populous zone, which is located in the extreme north-east of the country.

In the expectation of elections planned during 2014, each entity currently has a transitional legislative assembly led by a president and a provisional regional government, made up of twenty-two members, appointed ministers, who manage, with a ministerial council, the usual business of political, social, legal and economic life. These three regional governments are each headed by a Kurdish prime minister and two deputy prime ministers often originating from other religious or ethnic communities, Kurds, Arab, Christian or others.

Very interesting experiments in self-administration, particularly on the level of women's rights and of the minorities, but with also many contradictions, in particular the authoritarianism of the PYD forces, which did not hesitate to repress activists or to close establishments and institutions which are critical of it. In the same way since the beginning of October, obligatory conscription was decreed and implemented by the PYD in the areas under its control, provoking the flight of an increased number of young people belonging to all the communities, while the others who refused to serve in the YPG forces were imprisoned. This campaign was also the object of criticisms and protests, four women even demonstrated in the streets of Amuda on 14 October 2014.

One should not forget indeed only the PYD, just like its mother organization the PKK, lacks democratic references whether in its inner or external functioning in relation its rivals or simple groups. We should remember the protest movements at the end of June 2013 in some towns of Rojava, like Amuda and Derabissyat, against repression and the arrest of Kurdish revolutionary activists by PYD forces.

That does not prevent us from giving total support to the Kurdish national liberation movement in its fight for self-determination in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran against authoritarian governments that oppress them or prevent them from exercising their self-determination. This is why also that it is necessary to demand the removal of the PKK from all the lists of terrorist organizations in Europe and elsewhere.

We can indeed criticize the leadership of the PKK or the PYD for some of their policies, but as I said before, a basic principle for revolutionaries is that we must initially support all forms of struggle for liberation and emancipation unconditionally before having the right to criticize the way in which they are led.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Syrian popular movement faces several counter-revolutionary threats, first of all the Assad regime assisted by its Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah allies, which has recorded significant military victories like the recovery of the city of Homs in May 2014. The propaganda of the regime about the "war on terrorism", which is also taken up by the dictator Sissi in Egypt and the reactionary monarchies of the Gulf, finds more echo within the Western countries in their repressive measures that are supposedly to cope with the jihadist threat in Europe.

The other face of the counter-revolution is the Islamist and jihadist groups who are opposed to the goals of the Syrian revolution (democracy, social justice and rejection of communalism) and attack revolutionaries in the so-called liberated regions. These groups have benefited in the first place from the amnesty granted by the regime at the beginning of the revolution while democrats and other revolutionaries continued to languish in prison and to be murdered by the regime. Also the Assad regime does not systematically fight them, as in Raqqa, the city occupied by the IS, spared from

bombing from its occupation until the US bombing in August 2014 in Iraq against IS military advances.

In the second place these jihadist groups have benefited from financial support, especially at the beginning of the revolution but less the case today, from private donors in the Gulf monarchies who wanted to transform the popular revolution into a religious war. The jihadist groups like IS and the Jabhat al Nusra have moreover become largely financially autonomous thanks to the traffic generated by the occupation of oil wells and the development of a war economy.

It is also important, in spite of the difficulties and threats to the Syrian revolution, to consider it as an integral part of the revolutionary process in the region and its dynamic, and any attempt to separate them must be challenged. The revolutionaries in Syria are fighting like the other activists in the countries of the region for freedom and dignity and also against the authoritarian regimes and the Islamic groups and jihadists who are opposed to their objectives.

Similarly the so-called geopolitical oppositions or from above of those blocs of countries do not explain the dynamic of the Syrian revolution. This analysis leads some political commentators to positions that render incomprehensible the dynamics of the revolutionary process, and passes over in silence the fact that the major powers, allegedly opposed, collaborate together on different themes, such as for example on Iraq lately but also in the “fight against terrorism”.

The rapprochement over the last year between Iran and the United States is a perfect example and has demonstrated, if it were still necessary, the futility of the position of those sectors of the left who consider Russia and Iran as part of an anti-imperialist bloc. The different world imperialist powers and regional bourgeois regimes, in spite of their rivalry, have a common interest in the defeat of the popular revolutions of the region, and the most obvious example is that of Syria.

The Geneva 2 conference in March 2014 on Syria, supported by all the global and regional powers without exception, had the same objectives as the previous “peace” conferences: to reach an agreement between the Assad regime and an opportunistic faction – linked to the Western States and the Gulf monarchies – of the opposition coming together in the Syrian Coalition.

We must not imagine that the imperialist rivalries at the global level between the United States, China and Russia would be insurmountable for these powers, to the extent that these powers are in reality in relations of interdependence on many issues. All these regimes are bourgeois regimes that are and always will be the enemies of the popular revolutions, seeking to impose or strengthen a stable political context allowing them to accumulate and develop their political and economic capital in defiance of the popular classes. No regional or international power is a friend of the Syrian revolution, only the popular classes in struggle throughout the world. In Syria as elsewhere, no solution can be found as long as the democratic and social issues are not dealt with together.

Finally, as the revolutionary Syrians put it: “The enemies are multiple.... the revolution is one ... and it continues”. The Syrian popular movement has undoubtedly not said its last word.

Joseph Daher

P.S.

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

Footnotes

[1] Blog Syria Freedom Forever [Al qiada el muchtarakah liljeich sury el hur: rissalah maftouha lil jama3a el ikhwan el muslimun fi surya, April 2013:](#).

[2] The Local Coordination Committees in Syria, A year to the revolution of freedom and dignity, March 2012: see [here](#).

[3] Blog Syria Freedom Forever, [Condemnation of Zawahri's Statements Regarding his intervention in the Internal Affairs of Syria, April 4, 2013.](#)